

Two Sobralias

Sobralia chrysostroma is described and the identity of Sobralia leucoxantha is resolved

Text by Robert L. Dressler, PhD/Photographs by Kerry A. Dressler

IN 1866, *SOBRALIA LEUCOXANTHA* was described by Reichenbach, based on a plant collected at Desengaño (“disillusion”) in Costa Rica by Wendland. The description was brief, including “stem a foot or more, ... leaves long acuminate ... flowers about the size of *Sobralia fenzliana*” (= *Sob. decora*). Wendland had noted, “Flowers white, lip yellow.” Then, in 1889, a beautiful painting was published in *Curtis’ Botanical Magazine* as *Sobralia leucoxantha*. Understandably, people paid more attention to the painting than to Reichenbach’s terse description. The plant shown in the painting is one of the most attractive sobralias of southern Central America. It is a fine large plant with long tapering leaves, a glorious golden lip with orange and pale streaks, and a ruffled white border. Since the *Botanical Magazine* illustration, this plant has been called *Sobralia leucoxantha* more often than not. When I saw the original specimen of *Sob. leucoxantha* in Vienna a few years ago, I said to Ernst Vitek, “I wish I hadn’t seen that. It’s not at all the plant we’ve called by that name.”

The plant Reichenbach described is the one Schlechter later named as *Sobralia macra*, a common *Sobralia* in Costa Rica and Panama and much more modest in every respect. Others have called the beautiful plant with the golden lip *Sobralia powellii*, but that species of Central Panama is rather different. Actually, people have so consistently used the wrong names for our beautiful, golden-lipped *Sobralia* that no one seems to have thought of it as a “new” species, though none of the hundred or so names published in *Sobralia* fits it.

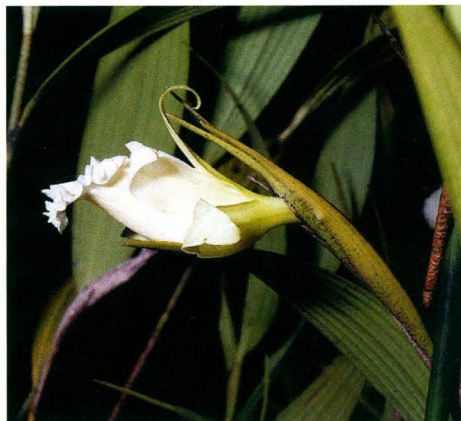
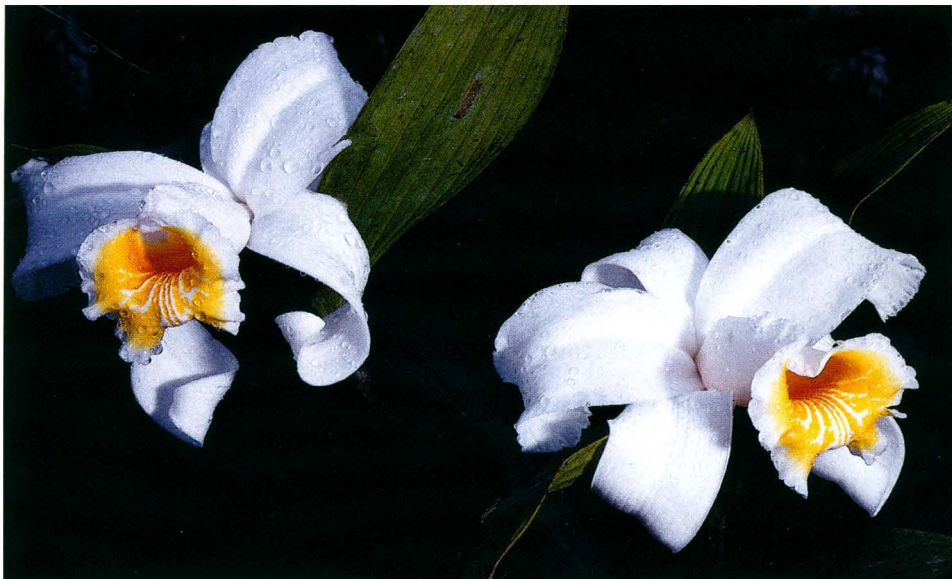
When a wrong usage has been quite consistent, one can request the Committee for Spermatophyta to suspend the rules and preserve the customary usage by conserving the name with a different type specimen. In fact, the white sobralias have been so confused that there has been no consistency. The golden-lipped *Sobralia* has been called either *Sob. leucoxantha* or *Sob. powellii*, and both names have been used for any large, white-flowered *Sobralia* with some yellow in the throat, of which there are several. In such a case, we might as well admit that the golden-lipped *Sobralia* has no valid name, and describe it as a new species. In such a case, I think that only one name would be appropriate.

Sobralia chrysostroma Dressler, sp. nov.

Herba epiphytica vel terrestris. Caulis teres, vaginis arctis leviter verrucosis inclusus. Folia disticha, anguste ovata, acuminata, subtus glabra. Flos singulus, terminalis, bracteis imbricantibus vestitus. Sepala oblonga vel elliptico-oblonga, acuta. Petala obovata. Labellum obovatum, lobus medius aureus et aurantiacus.

Plants terrestrial or epiphytic, caespitose. **Roots** .1–.3 inches (3–7 mm) in diameter. **Stems** 12–59 inches (30–150 cm), about .15–.19 inches (4–5 mm) thick above the base. **Leaves** ovate-lanceolate, acuminate, 5.5–8.6 x 1.7–3 inches (14–22 x 4.3–7.6 cm), sheaths usually minutely verrucose. **Inflorescence** terminal, bract cluster 2–2.3 x .3–.4 inches (5–6 x 0.8–1 cm), ellipsoid. **Ovary** and **pedicel** 1.4–1.8 inches (3.5–4.5 cm). **Sepals** and **petals** white, lip yellow with paler and darker streaks, margin usually white; dorsal sepal elliptic, acute or apiculate, 2.4–3.7 x 1–1.2 inches

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Top *Sobralia chrysostoma*, near Bosque Nuboso de Los Angeles, Alajuela, Costa Rica, growing as an epiphyte.

Above *Sobralia chrysostoma*, above El Valle de Antón, Coclé, Panama.

Above right The real *Sobralia leucoxantha* (syn. *Sob. macra*), a plant with the flower about half the size of a large *Sob. chrysostoma*, with slender stems and narrower leaves. The flowers often have a little purple deep within the lip. In lateral view, the lower surface of the throat is quite convex from base to midlobe, Valle de Fortuna, Chiriquí, Panama.

Right *Sobralia leucoxantha*, lateral view.

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(6.3–9.5 x 2.5–3.1 cm); lateral sepals similar, 3–3.7 x 1.3–2.5 inches (7.5–9.5 x 3.5–6.5 cm); petals obovate, acute, 2.7–3.5 x 1.2–1.6 inches (7–9 x 3–4 cm); **lip** obovate, basally clasping column, 2.5–3.3 x 1.3–2.5 inches (6.5–8.5 x 3.5–6.5 cm), with two basal divergent keels .4–.6 x .09–.1 inches (10–15 x 2.5–3 mm), with five low keels from base, three median keels longer than laterals, margin of midlobe undulate; **column** 1.6–1.8 inches (4–4.5 cm).

Holotype: Costa Rica. Alajuela; lava beds near Tabacon Lodge; 16 July 1999; R.L. Dressler 6166 MO, isotype, USJ.

Etymology: The epithet *chrysostoma*, “golden mouth” in Greek, is surely apt for this species.

Distribution: *Sobralia chrysostoma* ranges at least from Nicaragua to central Panama, mainly on the Caribbean slope. It is frequent on steep road cuts, as along the highway through Braulio Carrillo, north of San José, where the plants put on a glorious show on *Sobralia* days.

Discussion: There is some variation in size, but the species can be recognized by the white sepals and petals and the golden lip with white margin and both paler and darker streaks. The leaves are about two to three inches wide and taper rather evenly to narrow points. They are relatively flat, rather than strongly corrugated as in some other species. The stems are commonly mottled with red-purple, so much so that they often appear to be red-purple with small green spots. While this is not a plant for small greenhouses, it is excellent for tropical gardens and grows well at low elevations. □

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