

# *Sobralia Intermedia*

By PAUL H. ALLEN

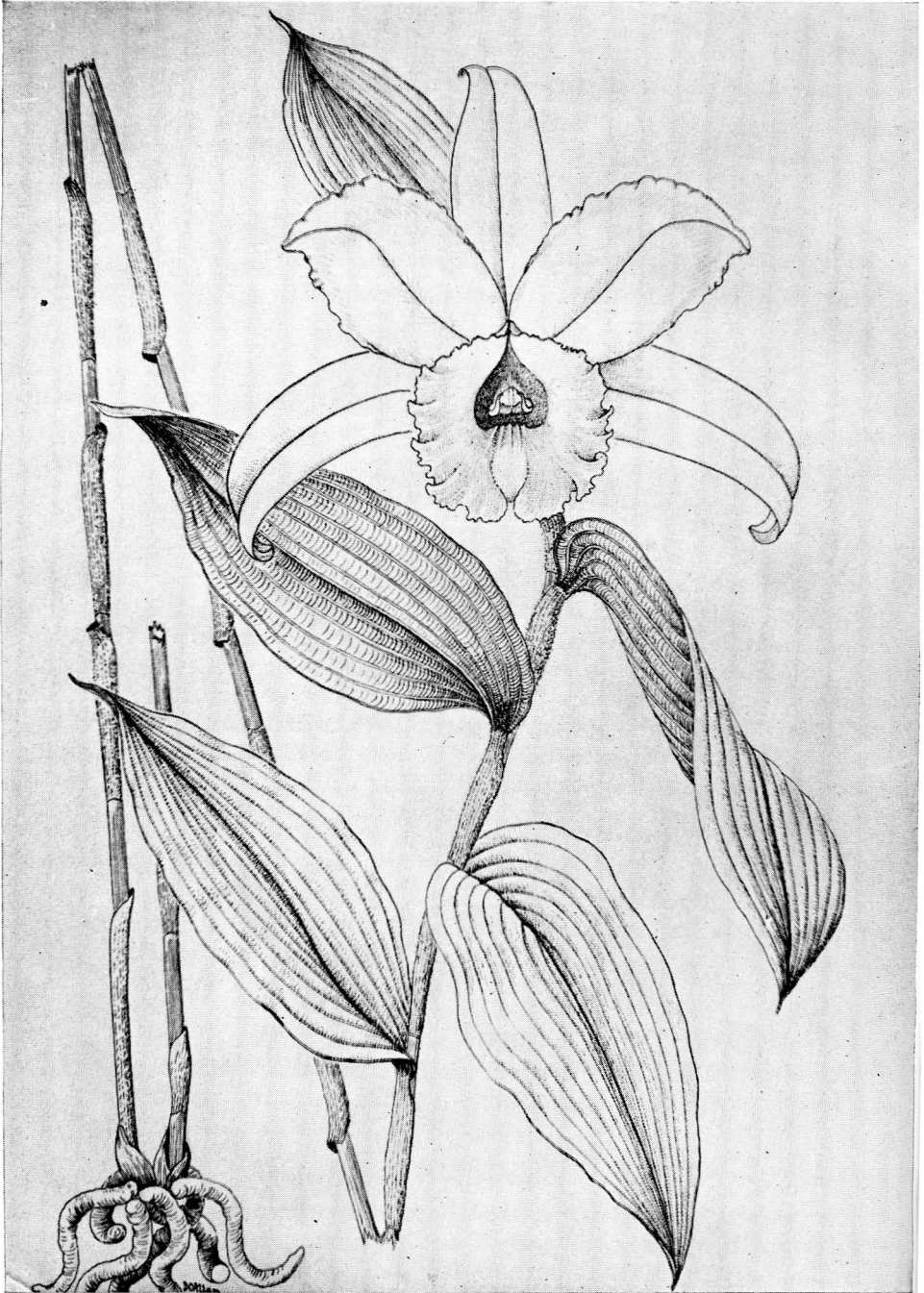
THE GENUS *SOBRALIA* of Ruiz and Pavon encompasses an assemblage of handsome, but taxonomically difficult, plants which range from southern Mexico to Peru and Brazil. This group covers a reasonably homogeneous association of types, with thirty-four species and varieties thus far credited to Central America, if the dubious *Sobralia panamensis* of Schlechter is excluded, the described entities increasing in number and complexity as one travels southward. All have reedy canes clothed with plicate foliage, and may be variously terrestrial, epiphytic or saxicolous.

In the majority of species the individual flowers last but a single day, but there are some, notably *S. macrantha* Lindl., from the northern half of the area under discussion, and *S. liliastrum* Lindl. which forms thickets about the wild cataracts of the upper Amazon, which persist in reasonably respectable condition for from 48 to about 60 hours. The generally compact and bud-like inflorescences which terminate the current annual growth of the majority of the species, are in reality incredibly condensed racemes, made up of from 3 to 4 to as many as 8 to 10 immature flowers, each resting in the axil of a papery or inconspicuously foliaceous bract, the whole bundle, if it can so be called, comprising the apical "bud" previously alluded to. These flowers mature at about 10 to 18 day intervals, depending on the weather, so that a *Sobralia* clump can be expected to provide brief but recurring pleasure for a period of several months.

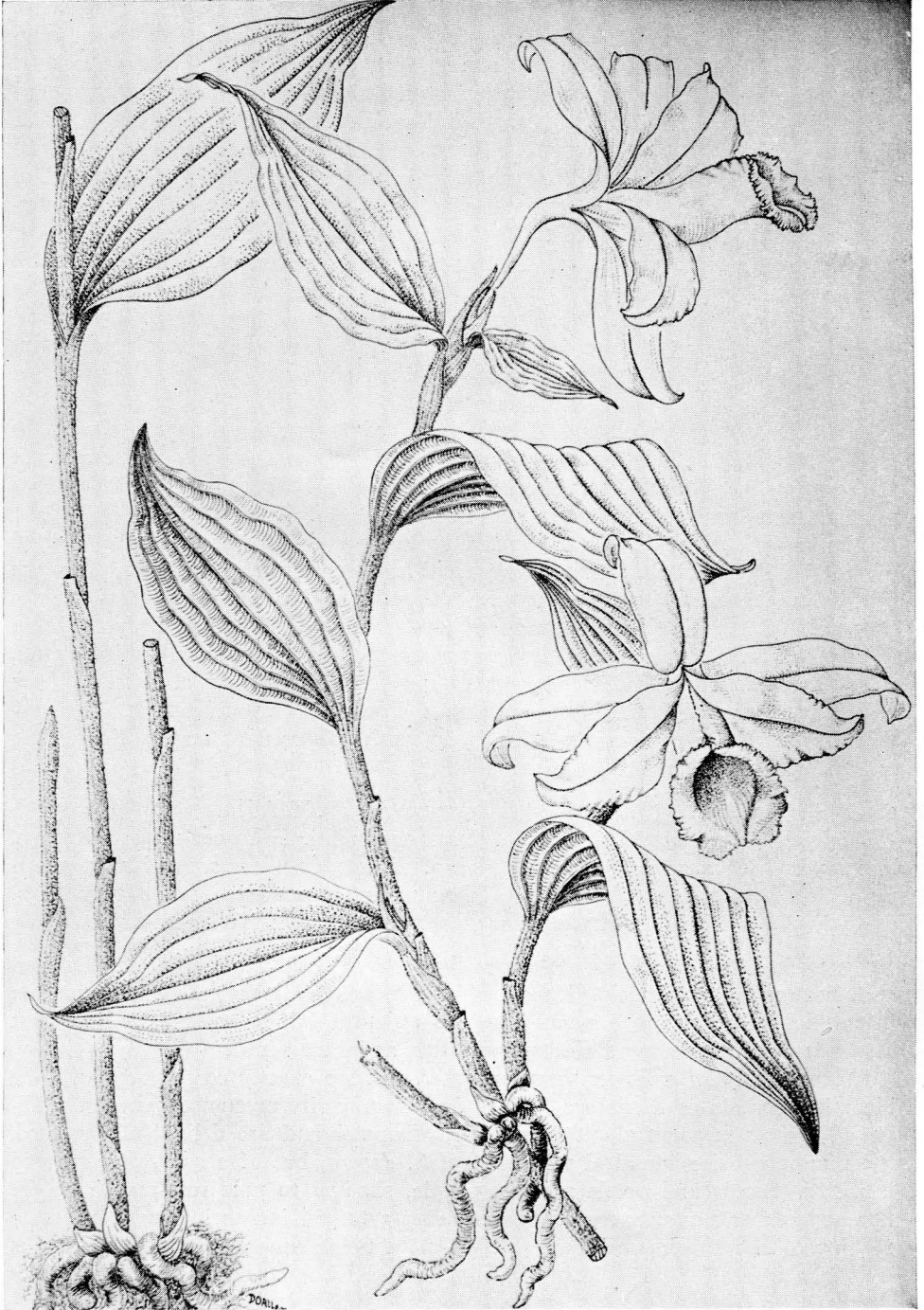
As a general rule, massive flowerings occur in those species in which the blooms are of a single day's duration, with nearly every active cane developing simultaneously, while those of a more durable character tend to be much more erratic in their habits. The former type, which might be characterized by such species as *S. decora* Batem., *S. lindleyana* Rchb. f. or *S. leucoxantha* Rchb. f. are among the few orchids in our part of the world that occur in sufficient concentrations to provide the sort of floral display envisioned as part of the tropic scene by most northern visitors. *Sobralia leucoxantha* and *S. lindleyana*, in particular, often cover whole mountainsides, or grow as dense colonies on rocky outcrops and produce a series of magnificent shows in their season.

Since it is a matter of more than routine interest, and since it has a direct bearing on my theme, it should be mentioned that *S. decora* and *S. leucoxantha*, which could scarcely be more dissimilar in floral size and coloring, flower simultaneously, a unique phenomenon among the orchids, insofar as my personal experience is concerned. Just how this marvellous coordination is accomplished is impossible to explain, in the light of our present imperfect knowledge.

It may come as something of a surprise to many orchid fanciers that these handsome plants lend themselves remarkably well to outdoor landscaping in the tropics, where they can be treated in about the same way as the reed-type Epidendrums, with the possible exception that somewhat better drainage conditions must be provided. The clumps, when once established, respond strongly to relatively heavy and frequent applications of dried cow manure, and will continue to thrive indefinitely under this treatment. My earliest experience with the genus involved the establishment of a mixed hedge of *S. decora* and *S. leucoxantha* in the Balboa Orchid Garden of the Missouri Botanical Garden, nearly twenty years ago. This assemblage produced more than two thousand blooms on a given day, and the indescribably delightful fragrance of the former species could be distinctly noted at a distance of more than a city block.



SOBRALIA LEUCOXANTHA



SOBRALIA DECORA

It was while in the process of developing this unique display that we discovered that *leucoxantha*, when taken from the most readily accessible sources in the barren volcanic badlands near El Valle de Anton, seldom flowered consistently in cultivation, and in fact its performance was so poor that we were forced to trek far across this fantastically broken country to an isolated clonal colony, which could be reached only with the aid of ropes, but which produced dependable shows in the Canal Zone.

It was on one such expedition, probably in 1937 or 1938, that I brought out several dozen plants of both the white and rose-purple types which were intermingled on the same escarpment. These were established in the lengthening row, and flowered shortly thereafter. To my joy and astonishment, I noted that one plant was markedly different in floral size and color from the rest, and was, in fact, of sufficiently intermediate character between *S. decora* and *S. leucoxantha* immediately to suggest hybrid origin, a possibility favored by the simultaneous flowering habit of the putative parents, and their close association at the place of discovery.

Form, color and fragrance had been inherited from *decora*, together with the unique habit of that species of producing plantlets from the ends of the canes at the termination of the blooming season, while size and a bronze color of the inner portion of the lip had been taken from *S. leucoxantha*.

This superb collection was eventually broken up, due to circumstances beyond my control, but the hybrid was retained, and has been a source of constant pleasure on my varied wanderings, and is with me still, having survived transfers from Panama to Costa Rica, Florida, and finally to Honduras. Yesterday brought fifteen fine blooms which graced the dining room table on a silver tray, reminding me, with their subtle fragrance, that they had never been properly christened. After searching the records available to me here, I do not find a previous use of the epithet *Intermedia* in the genus, which is herewith proposed as an addition to the known *Sobralias* of Central America.

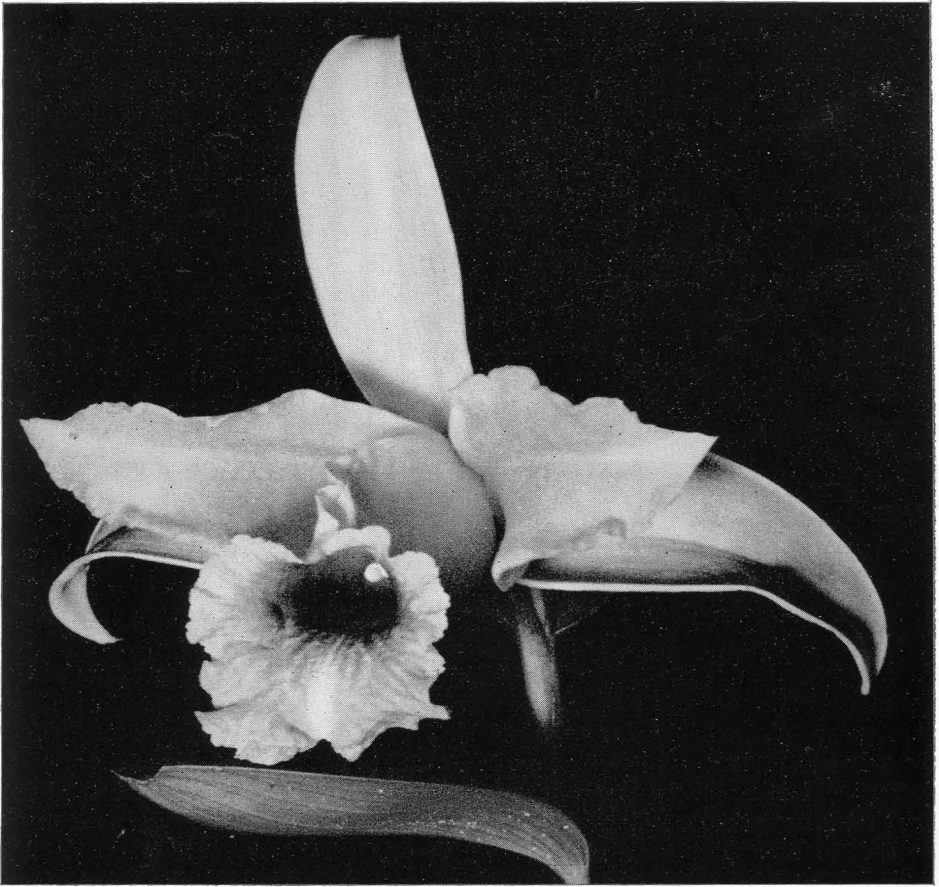
**Sobralia** × **Intermedia** (*S. decora* × *S. leucoxantha*), P. H. Allen.

Caules in planta viventi usque ad quinque pedes alti. Folia sex usque ad decem, late lanceolata, acuminata, plicata, glabra. Flores grandes, suaveolentes, roseo-purpurei, circa tres pollices longi; labellum tubulare, apice valde undulatum, roseo-purpureum cum linea viridiana alba atque cum fauce vinaceo-rufo.

Canes, in living plants, up to about five feet in height and  $\frac{5}{16}$ " in diameter, each bearing 6 to 10 plicate leaves, which are broadly lanceolate and acuminate in outline, glabrous, 4 to 8 inches long and  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to  $2\frac{3}{4}$  inches wide, the lowermost blades tending to become deciduous with age, as in the genus.

All current growths flower simultaneously, and are exactly coordinated with the blooming periods of *S. decora* and *S. leucoxantha*, its presumed parents. Individual blooms measure about 6 inches in diameter and are delightfully scented, the fragrance being identical with that of *S. decora*, but of a somewhat reduced intensity. Sepals and petals are rose-purple, shading to pale rose-purple on the tips and edges, the outer segments measuring 3 to  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches in length and 1 to  $1\frac{1}{4}$  inches in width in fresh material, while the petals are from  $2\frac{1}{4}$  to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches in length and  $1\frac{1}{4}$  to  $1\frac{3}{8}$  inches in width. The rose-purple, tubular labellum is from  $2\frac{7}{8}$  to 3 inches long and about  $1\frac{5}{8}$  to  $1\frac{3}{4}$  inches in breadth across the rose-purple, ruffled apex, which in addition exhibits a conspicuous white median line, the interior of the throat shading to a vinaceous rufous or ferruginous color. Cabeceras del Río Mata Ahogado, near El Valle de Anton, Rep. de Panama. 1200 ft. Allen 2670.

Exhausted canes occasionally produce adventitious plantlets from the terminal bud. These differ from those of *S. decora* in being invariably solitary rather than multiple, and in the lack of root development, the entire growth being of a much less vigorous character than in *S. decora*. It should be noted, in passing, that *S.*



SOBRALIA INTERMEDIA

*leucoxantha* never produces such plantlets, which fact would explain their reduced state in the presumed hybrid.

Whether this cross occurs with any frequency would be difficult to say, but it would seem strange, if it were at all common, that it should not have been picked up before. The original plant was split by Mr. Harry Dunn, of Ancon, Canal Zone, who undertook its care during my three years in Amazonia, but so far as is known, his plant and my own are the only specimens in existence.

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