

## PHRAGMIPEDIUM BESSEAE, A LIVING LEGEND

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The logo for the *Orchid Conservation 97* conference is a stylized flower of *Phragmipedium besseae*. The flower itself is distinctive enough not to be confused with that of any other species. The outline of the flower is created by four circles, representing the missions of the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens: conservation, education, research and display. Finally, the shape of the "red cross" symbolizes an urgent need to expand our efforts to conserve rare and endangered orchids.

*Phragmipedium besseae* was described in 1981, by Calaway H. Dodson, former Director of Selby Gardens, and Janet Kuhn, former Curator of the Orchid Identification Center. The original description was based on an incidental roadside collection from northern Peru by Libby Besse earlier the same year.

The vibrant red flowers of *Phragmipedium besseae* prompted immediate interest throughout the orchid world. It was an astonishing discovery considering how long such a flamboyant orchid had gone undetected. Growers and hobbyists rushed to pay handsome prices for living material, and a legend was born.

Creating a legend requires some extraordinary circumstances. *Phragmipedium besseae* has them all: a "mysterious" background, a unique and attractive flower, rarity in nature and demanding but not impossible cultural require-

ments. Consequently, this orchid rapidly developed a reputation of extraordinary proportions. Unfortunately, it also brought out some unflattering qualities in several people who darkened the history of this living jewel while simultaneously promoting its mystique.

Thanks in part to the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, this fascinating orchid has been propagated for horticulture. Many nurseries worldwide now offer greenhouse-grown plants for sale at reasonable prices. Moreover, the red color has bred true in hybrids, and the cultural requirements are now better understood.

Personally, I have had the good fortune to see this legend from many angles. I witnessed the excitement among orchid growers when *Phragmipedium besseae* first appeared. I have enjoyed getting to know most of the people involved in its introduction. Most of all, I have valued my opportunities to study this species in nature. Observations in the field have allowed me to separate much fact from fiction. For example, seeing plants in the wild truly reveals how they grow, whereas many of the published descriptions are based on imprecise second hand information. I have also witnessed the damage caused by greedy collectors. At one point, a seemingly secure population of perhaps several thousand plants disappeared almost over night. Illegal export proved to be disturbingly easy. Finally, my dealings with this orchid have provided a rare opportunity to understand how a legend is born.