

## THE BLACK ORCHID, *RHYNCHOSTELE OSCARII* ARCHILA (ORCHIDACEAE): NEAR TO THE MYTH

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**ABSTRACT.** In the world of plants, people record many histories and myths about the power or the behavior of some plants or about how plants can make extraordinary things happen. An example is the existence of the black or at least blue orchid. In September 2000, the author and his colleagues found an orchid of a very rare color, dark purple that looked almost black and reason enough, near to the myth, to call this new species, “the black orchid.”

**Key words:** ethnobotany, morphology, *Rhynchostele bictoniensis*

### INTRODUCTION

In the world of plants, many stories are told of flowers with magical powers, flowers that can motivate plant explorers to find them, flowers like the K'aam anx of the Mayan Q'eqchi' in Guatemala. Another plant-related story is that when people die, their souls enter into a tree, such as the baobab, the famous Bombacaceae of Africa. Plant scientists hear many stories that form a part of ethnobotany and the vision of different human cultures.

In 2000, stories began to surface about the black orchid in Guatemala, a plant that lives in

the montane forests of the country. Over the years, a number of reports were received of this black orchid. The first report occurred during my trip to a tropical forest to see the *Lycaste lasioglossa* Rchb.f., which is actually brown with some yellow.

One September day, a friend invited my father and me to see his collection, which he promised included the black orchid. The surprise came in

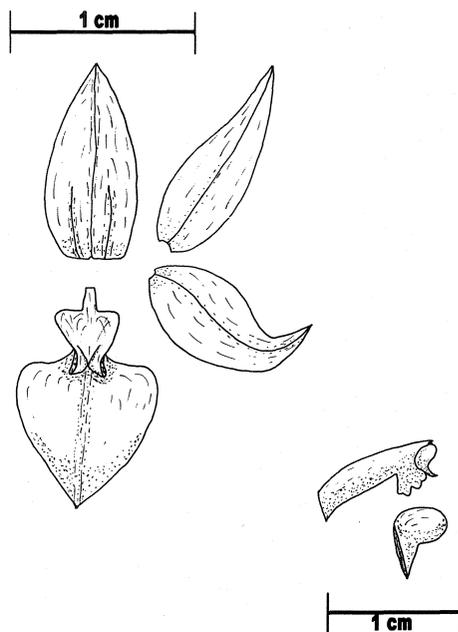


FIGURE 1. *Rhynchostele oscarii* Archila. Drawn by the author.



FIGURE 2. *Rhynchostele oscarii* Archila. Photographed by the author.

late afternoon, when we were shown the darkest orchid flower I had seen in 28 years of growing orchids. It wasn't black but a dark purple flower, but it was reason enough to call this plant the black orchid.

From first glance, we knew that it was a new species of the genus *Rhynchosele*, related to *R. bictoniensis* (Bateman) Soto Arenas & Salazar and to *R. uroskinneri* (Lind.) Soto Arenas & Salazar, but with major differences in the shape of the sepals, the key of the lip, the column, and the color of the flowers.

Several months after that first encounter, we found the plant at a high elevation in a montane forest in Guatemala. Finding only small populations on two different mountains, we collected plants and flowers to study the variations.

#### TAXONOMIC TREATMENT: NEW SPECIES

***Rhynchosele oscarii* Archila, Sp. Nov.** TYPE: Guatemala—Quetzaltenango province, discovered by Oscar Archila on Cerro Verde mountain at 2000 m, September 2001, FA-001. Holotype: BIGU 32245, Drawing SEL (F. Archila 011-Gua).

FIGURES 1, 2.

Species a *Rhynchosele bictoniensis* (Bateman) Soto Arenas et Salazar similis, sepalis ellipticus a obliquus-ellipticus forma distinctus, labelo clave sub-triangula-

ris differt, columna forma linearis-oblongus distinguitur, colore purpureo floris differt. Herba terrestris, erecta. Vidi vivam spontaneum et cultam. Folia liniaribus-elliptices, 14.5–28.5 × 2.5–3 cm. Pseudobulbi elliptici, 4.2–6.1 × 2.4–3.3 cm. Inflorescentiae 90 cm. Sepalum dorsalis atropurpureus, ellipticum, acutus, 1.73 × 1.2 cm. Sepala laterales atropurpurei, oblique elliptici, acuminati, 1.73 × 0.8 cm. Petala elliptici, acutis-acuminati, 1.46 × 0.56 cm. Labellum triangularis, acutus, 2.16 × 1.64 cm. Columna alata 1.15 cm. Alae, subcuadratae et dentatae, 0.2 × 0.23 cm.

**Plant** erect terrestrial, large in size for the genus. **Leaves** linear-elliptical, 14.5–28.5 × 2.5 cm, acute. Pseudobulbs elliptical, 4.2–6.1 × 2.4–3.3 cm. **Inflorescence** successively several-flowered raceme, 90 cm. **Flowers** dark purple; dorsal sepal elliptical, acute, 1.73 × 1.2 cm; lateral sepals oblique elliptical, acuminate, 1.73 × 0.8 cm; petals dark, elliptical, acute-acuminate, 1.46 × 0.56 cm; labellum dark, triangular, sub-toothed with a big flat sub-triangular key, 2.16 × 1.64 cm; column linear-oblong, 1.15 × 0.3 cm, winged in the apical half; wings 0.2 × 0.23 cm; anther white, rounded, 0.11 × 0.13 cm.

ETYMOLOGY: Named for Oscar Archila Euler, co-collector of the plant.

The new species represents a major discovery, because of the rare and beautiful color of its flowers, but also because it offers the potential for a new line of valuable hybrids.