

Ascocentrum miniatum

By Martin Motes

A Miniature Orchid Worthy of Wider Cultivation

THE COPPERY GOLD, ERECT FLOWER spikes of *Ascocentrum miniatum* are instantly beguiling. Described by John Lindley in 1847 as *Saccolobium miniatum*, it was moved by Rudolf Schlechter to his new genus *Ascocentrum* in 1913. This delightful species has had a long history of confusion with other orange-colored species of various degrees of similarity. The species as defined by Lindley is confined to Java and likely some areas of Sumatra and Peninsular Malaysia. The compact plants — 5 inches (12.5 cm) tall by 8 inches (20 cm) broad — produce their erect spikes of golden-orange flowers touched with a red suffusion in November and December in northern latitudes. This holiday-season flowering period and its subtle color make this most delicately hued of the species of the *Ascocentrum* genus particularly attractive as a pot plant for greenhouse and windowsill growers.



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The minute but distinct differences in lip structure that are definitive characters in determining species are not readily apparent to the casual horticultural observer or indeed even to botanists that are not paying sufficient attention. Blinded by the simplicity of the orange color, nearly everyone was convinced that all of the orange-flowered compact species were *Asctm. miniatum*. This error was corrected by the late Eric Christenson, PhD, who pointed out that *Asctm. miniatum* was a Javanese species quite distinct from the Indochinese, Indonesian and Philippine species that bore superficial similarities to it.

Ascocentrum miniatum can easily be distinguished from other orange-flowered species of the *Ascocentrum* group by vegetative characteristics. Unlike the short — 4–4¾-inch (10–12-cm) — thick straight leaves of *Ascocentrum garayi*, *Asctm. miniatum* has longer — 6¾–8-inch (17–20-cm) — thin V-shaped leaves that curve gently downward. Foliage of the wide-ranging *Ascocentrum aurantiacum* is similar to *Asctm. miniatum*, but the overall plant size of *Asctm. aurantiacum* is nearly double that of *Asctm. miniatum*. Like *Asctm. miniatum*, *Asctm. aurantiacum* blooms in the autumn in response to shortening days. *Ascocentrum garayi* flowers in the spring. *Ascocentrum*



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miniatum also has a distinct reddish tone to its flowers, which is lacking in both *Asctm. garayi* and *Asctm. aurantiacum*.

The qualities that distinguish *Asctm. miniatum* from related species in the *Ascocentrum* group also make it particularly attractive as a horticultural subject: small size, unusual color and autumn blooming season. *Ascocentrum miniatum* is petite enough to find a niche in the smallest greenhouse or windowsill, or even under lights. The brilliant color of its spikes that resemble a hyacinth will light up any collection. It blooms in Northern Hemisphere collections November through December when few other members of the Aeridinae species grace us with their blooms.

[1] *Ascocentrum aurantiacum* (frequently confused with *Ascocentrum miniatum*) ranges widely in both the Philippines and Indonesia.

The species has always been rare in cultivation. James Veitch (1894) wrote that it is “now rarely seen in the orchid collections of this country.” Such a delightful species was ignored for so long, largely because growers thought they had *Asctm. miniatum* when they had either *Asctm. garayi* or *Asctm. aurantiacum*. Because of the confusion of *Asctm. miniatum* with *Asctm. garayi*, it is extremely difficult to ascertain if any hybrids from the real *Asctm. miniatum* have been registered. Almost certainly, the



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hybrids registered by breeders in Thailand were made with *Asctm. garayi*. Similarly, *Asctm. miniatum* is not present in collections in Florida. We at Motes Orchids have been somewhat remiss in not utilizing this delightful species in hybrids, but its potential as an autumn bloomer to induce free flowering in hybrids with spring-blooming species is largely eclipsed by the autumn-blooming *Vanda sanderiana*. We have, of late, been attracted to the idea of crossing *Asctm. miniatum* to its spring-blooming cousins *Asctm. curvifolium* and *Asctm. garayi*. Hybrids from *Asctm. miniatum* with both of these species are in the works (about 18 months from flowering) and should add additional taxonomic confusion, but also augment our store of colorful free-flowering miniature ascocentrums.

Ascocentrum miniatum is still rare in cultivation, but well worth the effort to find. I came upon some plants at the Redland Orchid Festival in Homestead, Florida (where so many wonderful things come to light). My friend Michael Ooi of Ooi Leng Sun Orchids from Malaysia was selling them as "*Asctm. garayi*." I snapped up all six plants he had left. He will doubtless bring more to the Tamiami Orchid Festival in January (Miami, Florida) and, being wiser, will charge more for them. Meanwhile, I now have plants of *Asctm. miniatum* to outcross to our clone 'Mary Motes', CHM/AOS, and hopefully through Ooi's and my efforts, reintroduce this charming species to cultivation.

The key to the simple cultivation of ascocentrums also lies in an understanding of plant architecture. Culture is similar to that for vandas (from which genus DNA

evidence shows little difference), but the leaves of *Asctm. miniatum* denote a plant that needs high light intensity. It should be grown in the brightest part of the greenhouse, windowsill or light garden. Like vandas, *Asctm. miniatum* does best with abundant water but should dry quickly. Also as with vandas, the best advice under all growing conditions is to water with two or three passes until the roots turn overall dark green. Water again when the roots have returned to a white appearance.

Outdoors in tropical and subtropical areas, *Asctm. miniatum* is typically grown in slatted wood or plastic baskets to allow for the rapid drying that it needs following heavy rains. In temperate greenhouses, on windowsills or under lights, clay pots are more practical. These can also be partially filled with bark, charcoal or wood pieces relatively large for the 3–4 inch (7.5–10 cm) pots that usually contain this diminutive species. In a mixed collection of orchids it is advisable always to water *Asctm. miniatum* (and the other Aeriidinae) first and then at the end of the watering session, last. Weekly to biweekly applications of Peters Excel® 15-5-15, plus additional applications of potassium nitrate and magnesium sulfate will keep the plants nourished. Michigan State University 19-4-23 is also recommended. Like most other Aeriidinae, *Asctm. miniatum* does best at temperatures between 60 F (15 C) and 86 F (30 C). Growth will be slowed or stopped at temperatures below 50 F (10 C) and above 94 F (34 C).

With a modicum of effort, *Ascocentrum miniatum* can add seasonal color to any collection of orchids.

- [2] The true *Asctm. miniatum* from Java has distinctively copper red flowers. The clone 'Mary Motes', CHM/AOS, is shown. Grower: Motes Orchids.
- [3] The golden yellow *Ascocentrum garayi* from Thailand displays its flowers on a plant bearing thick horizontally held leaves. This specimen was awarded as *Asctm. aurantiacum* 'Harford', AM/AOS. Grower: The Little Greenhouse.
- [4] Seen here is a rare yellow form of *Asctm. aurantiacum*. Grower: Motes Orchids.

References

- Lindley, J. 1847. *Saccolabium miniatum*. *Botanical Register* sub. t. 52.
- Veitch, J.A. 1887–1894. *A Manual of Orchidaceous Plants*. Volume 2. James Veitch & Sons, Chelsea. p. 117.

Martin Motes, PhD, has received scores of American Orchid Society awards. His hybrids garnered gold, silver and bronze medals at the 18th World Orchid Conference in Dijon, France, where Vanda Mary Motes (Blue Grig × tessellata) won the trophy for Best Vanda in Show. He is an accredited AOS judge and author of three books and numerous articles. Motes, in collaboration with David Roberts, PhD, and Lauren Gardiner, PhD, of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, is working on a monograph of the genus Vanda. His wife, Mary Motes, is author of the memoir of Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Kosova, and the cult, best-selling comic novel Orchid Territory. 25000 Farmlife Road, Redland, Florida 33031 (email martinmotes@gmail.com).