Zygopetalum

Pronunciation: zy-go-PET-a-lum

Tribe: Maxillarieae
Subtribe: Zygopetalinae

Zygopetalum, is from the Greek *zygon*, yoke, *petalon*, petal or sepal; referring to the 'holding together' of the flower segments by the callus, It is a New World genus mostly distributed through tropical South America and closely related to *Bollea*, *Huntleya, Pabstia, Pescatorea, Promenaea, Warrea* and a number of other minor genera. They are generally considered to grow best at intermediate temperatures but will withstand summer heat if shaded correctly and well-watered and can take some cool nights in winter if kept drier than usual. Wet and cold is usually fatal and the unsightly leaf spotting we sometimes see on the leaves of both hybrids and species in the genus can usually be traced to free moisture on the leaves at night when temperatures are lower than optimal. ***Zygopetalum maculatum*** (syn. ***Zygopetalum mackayi***) is particularly susceptible to this sort of leaf spotting.

There are many intergeneric hybrids available too, most with almost unpronounceable names and often with the annoying habit of producing flowers with parts missing or fused together. One of the great characteristics of some zygopetalums is their heady fragrance and people enjoy this characteristic. A lack of variety in their color means that many species and hybrids have a sameness that can become boring.

Number of species: About 40 (The World Monocot Checklist currently recognizes only 15 distinct species)

Distribution: Tropical South America, Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Peru and Bolivia

CULTURE:

Temperature: They grow best in intermediate to moderate temperatures. These are soft-leaved plants and dislike direct sunlight, especially in the hot months.

Light: No more than 3,000 ft. candles (about 70% shade) of light is optimal except in winter when on a sunny day, higher light levels, because they are not accompanied by high leaf temperatures, will do no harm for a few days. As with most orchids, more direct light very early or late in the day is not likely to be detrimental.

Water-Humidity: Zygopetalums require humid conditions under moderate shade with plenty of water during the growing season, less after new pseudobulbs are fully formed.

Fertilizer: The genus is not fussy about feed ratios so any slow release or liquid feed is suitable. A liquid 20-20-20 formulation at half label recommendation year round has proven to work well. Some growers report excellent results with a light topdressing of organics in late spring and we have used Milorganite for this purpose with excellent results. The organics can be a useful source of trace elements too, so feel comfortable in applying them as a topdressing every spring. Avoid feeding with high nitrogen levels as this can make the foliage brittle and stretched.

Potting: Like most orchids, zygopetalums will respond best if divided and repotted when the new growths are stretching upward. They are quite succulent and should be divided with care or pseudobulbs are easily

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damaged or even broken. The roots are soft and expect to break most of them in dividing so the divisions need a bit of babying along to become re-established. Any medium that is free draining such as a mixture of coconut chip, bark and perlite will work well. We have found zygopetalums are not comfortable in scoria, Aliflor or similar products. Providing the roots are white, smaller plants can be potted up to larger pots throughout most of the year except for winter. Incorporation of dolomitic lime in the potting medium or the addition of it as a topdressing twice a year will help keep the foliage a little more woody and less prone to bruising or breaking.

Cultivation: zygopetalums are true epiphytes and quite intolerant of poorly drained or soggy potting mixes. Some of the more rhizomatous and rare species will adapt well to basket or tree fern slab culture but the common species like ***Z.intermedium, mackayi (syn. maculatum), crinitum*** and ***maxillare*** are happiest in shallow pots or pans. As most of the hybrids trace back to these parents, it follows that the hybrids will not enjoy deep pots or excessively large growing containers.