

A review of *Dendrobium* × *delicatum*, artificial hybrids of *D. kingianum* × *D. speciosum*, and the status of *D. Speciokingianum* (Orchidaceae)

Peter B. Adams

School of Biosciences, University of Melbourne and National Herbarium,
Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne.

Correspondence: pbadams45@gmail.com

Abstract

The natural hybrid *Dendrobium* × *delicatum* (F.M.Bailey) F.M.Bailey (*D. kingianum* Bidwill ex. Lindl. × *D. speciosum* Sm.) occurs sporadically and is found in areas where *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum*, var. *hillii* Masters, var. *grandiflorum* F.M.Bailey and var. *carnavonense* Peter B.Adams grow in close proximity to *D. kingianum*. The largest population is in northern New South Wales, where *D. speciosum* var. *hillii* occurs. At Mt Alum, Bulahdelah, New South Wales, there was a significant number of natural hybrids with the parent *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum*, originally described as *D. kestevenii* Rupp. Back crosses to the parent species were present, but over-collection has reduced the natural hybrids to a very low level. The first artificially produced Australian *Dendrobium* hybrid was bred in England by Sir Trevor Lawrence and registered in 1892 with the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) as *D. Speciokingianum*. The parents were not recorded, and an illustration is not available. The description is consistent with a crossing of *D. speciosum* × *D. × delicatum*. The white flowering parent identified as *D. kingianum* was likely to have been a plant of *D. × delicatum* incorrectly labelled as *D. kingianum* var. *album* 'Williams'. The name *D. Speciokingianum* is accepted by the RHS, but the parentage recorded for this grex was most likely incorrect. The name *Dendrobium Delicatum* has been used for the cross *D. kingianum* × *D. speciosum* by Australian growers and breeders since the outstanding breeding by Ira Butler in the 1960s. Hybrids between *D. kingianum* and *D. speciosum*, naturally occurring and artificial, have attracted much confusion and debate about parentage, taxonomy and nomenclature. It is concluded that *D. Speciokingianum* was not the result of a cross between the species as implied in the name or the stated parentage, and that the grex *D. Delicatum* should be used for the progeny of *D. kingianum* × *D. speciosum*.

Introduction

Dendrobium kingianum Bidwill ex. Lindl. occurs on the east coast of Australia, mainly in New South Wales, extending into southern Queensland. It varies in vegetative and floral characteristics, including flower colour, and has two subspecies. *Dendrobium kingianum* subsp. *kingianum* occurs along the east coast, while subsp. *carnavonense* Peter B.Adams has a much smaller, disjunct distribution in inland central Queensland. *Dendrobium speciosum* Sm. has a wide distribution on the east coast, from eastern Victoria to north Queensland. *Dendrobium speciosum* is highly variable with nine varieties described (Adams et al. 2006). Both species belong to sect. *Dendrocoryne* Lindl. The distribution of *D. kingianum* overlaps with four varieties of *D. speciosum* – vars. *speciosum*, *hillii* Masters, *grandiflorum* F.M.Bailey and *carnavonense* Peter B.Adams. Natural hybrids between *D. speciosum* and *D. kingianum* are occasionally found throughout the range of *D. kingianum*, most commonly with *D. speciosum* var. *hillii* and rarely with the other varieties. There are limited studies of the natural hybrids in the

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literature, in part related to their rarity and therefore difficulty in sourcing populations for study.

The first published reference to an artificially raised Australian *Dendrobium* hybrid was in 1892 in England, for plants grown by Sir Trevor Lawrence. Plants of The World Online (POWO) accepts *D. × speciokingianum* as the natural hybrid and the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) orchid hybrid register accepts *D. Specioekingianum* as the name of the artificially produced hybrid. However, there has been uncertainty about the identity and origin of the parents used to create the hybrid. In this paper, *D. × delicatum* (F.M.Bailey) F.M.Bailey is used for the natural hybrid and *D. Delicatum* is used for artificial hybrids following Renner (2024).

In this paper, Nineteenth-Century reports and illustrations of the parents and the first Australian hybrid are reviewed, together with the history of discovery, distribution and characteristics of *D. kingianum*, *D. speciosum* and *D. × delicatum* and subsequent Australian breeding to gain further understanding of the most likely parentage of the original artificial hybrid.

Dendrobium × delicatum

The earliest published name was *Dendrobium speciosum* var. *delicatum* F.M.Bailey (in Anonymous 1883), for a plant from Main Range west of Brisbane New South Wales, possibly from Spring Bluff (Overall 1963). Bailey (1884) considered it to be a variation of *D. speciosum* (only var. *speciosum* and var. *hillii* had been described at that time). He later elevated it to the rank of species (Bailey 1902). In 1930 Dr. Kesteven found plants with features intermediate between *D. speciosum* and *D. kingianum* at Mt Alum and sent them to H.M.R. Rupp, an honorary staff member at the New South Wales National Herbarium, who described them as a new species, *D. kestevenii* Rupp, noting that a hybrid origin was possible (1931). In *The Orchids of New South Wales* (Rupp 1948), after describing *D. kestevenii* var. *coloratum* Rupp, stated “There is a good deal to be said for the opinion that they should be united with the Spring Bluff plants”.

Despite Rupp and Hunt being “practically certain” that the plant was a natural hybrid (Rupp and Hunt 1947) the debate continued for some years in *The Orchadian* in the 1960s. Eventually, a consensus view, which included Rupp, was that the plants were natural hybrids.

A table of differences and similarities of *D. × delicatum* plants from the two sites, at Main Range Queensland and Mt Alum New South Wales, was published by Gordon (1965), reflecting the different varietal parentage of *D. speciosum* – var. *hillii* in the north and var. *speciosum* in the south. Despite general agreement in the mid-1960s, Dockrill (1969) recorded it as ‘SPECIES No. 29 *D. × delicatum* (F.M. Bail) F. M. Bail.’ and accorded it species rank in a revised edition (Dockrill, 1992). The taxonomic and nomenclatural history of *D. × delicatum* was reviewed by Renner (2024) who demonstrated that the nothospecific name *D. × speciokingianum* cannot be accepted because it contravenes Art. H.10.2 of the International Code of Nomenclature (Turland et al. 2018), and this will not be further considered here.

Natural hybrids are found where the parents of *D. × delicatum* grow closely together and are recognizable by their plant form and floral characteristics including size, width of segments and shape and the presence of purple dots on the labellum. There is

variation in plant form between and within different regions in southern Queensland and central New South Wales (Adams and Lawson 1995) and the most striking and easily recognisable *D. × delicatum* are the larger more attractive forms with *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum* as a parent, found between Alum Mountain and the Gloucester area of New South Wales.

Dendrobium kingianum var. *album* Williams

Doubt about the identity of the *Dendrobium kingianum* parent used to make the original *D. Specioekingianum* stems from the existence of a white-flowering plant named *D. kingianum* var. *album* Williams (Fig. 1), which was well-known in England during the late 19th Century. The plant had a very robust form, with some features resembling *D. speciosum*, but with smaller pseudobulbs. Racemes were long, with 20 or more well-presented flowers, well beyond the absolute maximum of 14 (usually 12 or less) expected for *D. kingianum*. Flower size, shape and midlobe characters were all outside the range of *D. kingianum*, especially labellum shape and the presence of purple spotting. This last character is a feature of *D. × delicatum*, as labellum markings in *D. kingianum* are always in bars and streaks rather than spots (Adams and Lawson 1995). These features indicate *D. kingianum* var. *album* Williams was a primary hybrid, an interpretation widely accepted today (Clements 1989, Dockrill 1993, Adams & Lawson 1995, Renner 2024). Plants of *D. × delicatum* may continue to be distributed in Europe under the name *D. kingianum* var. *album* (Clements 1989).

Between 1943 and 1995, Australian orchid botanists concluded that *D. kingianum* var. *album* was unlikely to be true *D. kingianum*. Rupp and Hunt (1943) stated that Australian botanists were “doubtful that English botanists in the 19th C were not confusing the white flowering form of *D. kingianum* for *D. delicatum*”. Upton (1989) stated “It is not *kingianum*” and Renner (2024) concluded similarly. The original description (Williams 1888) with 20 flowers on a raceme a foot long and shape characteristics with features of *D. speciosum* supports a hybrid origin.

Adams and Lawson (1995) also considered that var. *album* Williams was not true *D. kingianum*. The most convincing evidence comes from comprehensive morphological surveys across the entire distribution of *D. kingianum* which indicate that the morphological features of *D. kingianum* var. *album* do not fit within the range of the species (Adams and Lawson, 1995, Adams et al. 2021).

The confusion of *D. × delicatum* with *D. kingianum* var. *album* is understandable. In the late 19th Century few sect. *Dendrocoryne* taxa were described, and the variation and delimitation of species were poorly known. It is also very unlikely that a natural white *D. kingianum* was grown in England at that time. The white colour is rare in the natural species, even in remote areas, with only three plants found on extensive surveys over 25 years (Adams and Lawson 1995). White-flowering plants of true *D. kingianum* are small-flowering and have much less attractive plants and flowers than those of *D. kingianum* var. *album* (Fig. 2). *Dendrobium kingianum* is typically pale to deep mauve and purple, and this is consistent with illustrations in 19th Century magazines and journals of the time (Fig. 3). The descriptions of *D. kingianum* receiving prizes or awards at the time indicate short plants with mauve or ‘rosy purple’ flowers consistent with an origin in the southern third of the range (Anonymous 1896a).



Figure 1. *Dendrobium kingianum album* of Williams, *The Orchid Album* 7: t. 332 (1888). Note 20 flowers per raceme and purple spots on the labellum, consistent with *D. × delicatum*.



Figure 2. *Dendrobium kingianum* 'Busby's Flat White' from northern New South Wales. Small flowers, low numbers of flowers per raceme. Photos by Peter Adams.

A further indication that the parent used to make *D. Speciokingianum* was *D. × delicatum* is the white colour of the progeny (Anonymous 1892). When *D. kingianum* with white flowers are used as a parent, the progeny are rarely white, but nearly always mauve-coloured, whereas hybrids made with *D. × delicatum* produce multiple colours, including white (Adams 2023).

Dendrobium Speciokingianum

There is no record of the origin or nature of the parents of the first known Australian *Dendrobium* hybrid. *Gardeners Chronicle* (Anonymous 1892) recorded that Sir Trevor Lawrence Bar. M.P. exhibited plants of *D. speciosum* × *D. kingianum* with small white flowers. No name for the grex was published, but in 1896 he received an Award of Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society using the name *D. Speciokingianum*. A short description of the plant was published in *The Orchid Review* (Anonymous 1896b):

"The plant distinctly combines the characters of the two parents, those of *D. speciosum* being particularly well marked in the vegetative organs, though the pseudobulbs are considerably smaller than in that species, as would be expected. The racemes are about six to nine inches long and bear nine to twelve flowers, which are white, three-quarters of an inch long, and borne on longish pedicels. The lip is three-lobed and marked all over with light purple spots and streaks, arranged in radiating lines, the front lobe being very broadly rounded."

Although there were several references to the plant in gardening magazines, the hybrid description notes 'purest of white flowers' and 'the only trace of any colouring being the lilac purple spots on the lip' (Anonymous 1896a). There is also a note that the plant 'resembles a very large *D. kingianum albidum*'. This is the only information about the plant. No illustrations have been found.

Historical information about European settlement in Australia and the distribution of *D. kingianum* can help determine the likely origin of *D. kingianum* var. *album*. The Alum Mountain area and north towards Gloucester is where the superior large-flowered *D. × delicatum* are found, with *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum* as the larger-growing parent (Fig. 4). The area was explored for timber, minerals and agricultural land and then settled with the auction of public land in 1856, and a timber mill set up in 1862. It was accessible from the large centres of Sydney and Newcastle. In 1943, Rupp recorded *D. × delicatum* as 'growing freely on the hills of Alum Mtn'. It is most probable that the plant named *D. kingianum* var. *album* Williams was collected and sent to England from that region. Areas to the north, west and south of this region do not have plants matching this form.

The second parent plant of *D. Speciokingianum*, *D. speciosum*, is of unknown origin, but it is considered most likely to be *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum*. Plants of this taxon were known to be imported in quantity from the Sydney colony, where it was once common on sandstone outcrops and cliffs (Fig. 5). It was widely grown in the English stove houses. Illustrations in the late 19th Century confirm that *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum* was being grown and flowered. The illustration of Curtis's (1851) *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum*, 'The Great Dendrobium', shows flowers not fully opened or expanded.

Dendrobium speciosum var. *hillii* occurs in New South Wales north of Newcastle. It was described in 1861, from the Moreton Bay area in southern Queensland. This area was opened up by the Australian Agricultural Company in the 1830–40s. Some plants were growing in England at the probable time the hybrid was created, but likely much less common than *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum*. It was illustrated in *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, 5261 and appeared in *Gardeners' Chronicle* January 27, 1877, but the illustration is much more like *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum* from the Sydney region, with large, well-presented flowers with wide segments.



Figure 3. *Dendrobium kingianum* 'Mauve'. This species was grown in England in the late 1800s. From Lawrence, *Paxton's Mag. Bot.* 12: 97 (1846). Illustration by S. Holden.



Figure 4. *Dendrobium* × *delicatum* 'Alum Mountain' syn. *D.* × *kestevenii*, a naturally occurring hybrid individual. Photo by Peter Adams.

Dendrobium speciosum var. *hillii* is an unlikely parent for *D.* *Speciokingianum*. It grows into large plants with many small, crowded, white flowers compared to var. *speciosum*. English breeders had extensive experience in breeding quality *Cattleya* Lindl., *Oncidium* Sw. and soft-cane *Dendrobium* hybrids at the time. Using *D. speciosum* var. *hillii* would produce excessively tall plants with flowers of inferior quality. *Dendrobium* *Speciokingianum* was not recorded as a parent in further breeding.

In conclusion, *Dendrobium* *Speciokingianum* was made in England around 1870–80 and may have taken eight or more years to flower. The most likely parentage is *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum* × *D.* × *delicatum*. This cross was later remade in Australia by Reg Leaney and registered as *D.* Jane Leaney in 1964. The first registered *Dendrobium* primary hybrid in Australia was *D.* Ellen (*D. kingianum* × *D. tetragonum*) by Wilhelm Schmidt in 1928, for progeny of a cross made 14 years earlier (Upton 1989).

History of Breeding of *Dendrobium Delicatum* in Australia

Hybridization of cool-growing Australian *Dendrobium* expanded in the 1960s. There were a small number of breeders and nurseries making hybrids at the time, including Noel Jupp, Reg Leaney, Wondabah Orchids, Ira Butler, Wayside Nursery (Bill

and Jean Cannons), Roger Bedford, David Cannon and Wal Upton of Double-U Orchids (Cannon 2020). Australian breeders used only indigenous parents (Upton 1989). No plants of *D. Speciokingianum* or *D. kingianum* var. *album* were reported in Australia. Ira Butler was probably the only person producing *D. Delicatum* (David Cannon *pers. comm.*) and his '1B 181' cross resulted in outstanding floriferous plants with high-quality flowers. They were short to medium in height, up to 30 cm, with long, arching racemes with 20 or more flowers. The flower colour was pure white to rich mauve.

Seedlings from this original cross are still in collections e.g. 'Kerry' (rich mauve) and 'Joy Belles' (pale mauve). His original breeding records appear to have not been recorded or have been lost. The Australasian Native Orchid Society published a final group of his plants for sale in 1973, where the '1B 181' cross was described as "*D. kingianum* dark pink 'Logans' × *D. speciosum*". Logan was a Sydney grower who supplied Butler with selected plants for breeding at the time. However, despite that record, the exact parents used by Butler remain unknown. They are likely to have been a local *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum*, and a short to medium-sized *D. kingianum* from the southern part of the range, where the best breeding forms grow. The Ira Butler seedlings were sold and distributed by Wayside Nursery, Roger Bedford and David Cannon in small numbers, and were rarely used in further breeding (D. Cannon *pers comm.*).

Other breeders have struggled to reproduce such outstanding results. Ira Butler listed *D. Delicatum* seedlings made with *D. kingianum* var. *pulcherrimum*, a very short-growing plant with 3–4 relatively large, deep mauve flowers, found in the southern half of the distribution range. Ted and Barbara Gregory of Merrellen Orchids used several varieties of *D. speciosum*: var. *speciosum*, var. *curvicaule*, var. *pendunculatum*, var. *grandiflorum* and var. *hillii* (only one cross) in their breeding of *D. Delicatum*. The *D. kingianum* plants used were naturally occurring, in colours from white to deep purple. The seedlings were distributed widely to southern Queensland, New South Wales and Victorian growers but are rarely seen. When *D. speciosum* var. *pendunculatum* was used as the parent, the plants were short in stature with erect racemes and attractive flowers coloured pale to deep mauve.

In the late 1950s to early 1980s, *D.* × *delicatum* was used as a parent in RHS registrations by Noel Jupp (3 times), Phil Spence (3 times), David Cannon (twice), Reg Leaney (twice) and Wal Upton (once). The plants used were selections of superior form, mainly from Alum Mountain, or occasional plants from further north to Gloucester and Comboyne (D. Cannon *pers comm.*). With the explosion of Australian *Dendrobium* breeding now producing larger and more colourful flowers, including purple, yellow, and orange, *D. Delicatum* is no longer grown as widely.

Peter Adams and Sheryl Lawson used natural plants of *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum*, var. *curvicaule* and var. *grandiflorum*. They crossed them with linebred *D. kingianum* which originated from the southern third of the distribution and were short growing, with high-quality flowers. Some plants with *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum* parentage produced short, robust plants with erect-arching racemes bearing large flowers with white to cream flowers of heavy texture (Fig. 6).



Figure 5. *Dendrobium speciosum* var. *speciosum* 'National White'. Plants like this were common around the Sydney area in the 19th Century. Photo by Peter Adams.



Figure 6. *Dendrobium Delicatum* (*D. kingianum* 'Pale Dragon' × *D. speciosum* 'Moongazer'), a hybrid made from line-bred seedlings. Note the purple spotting on the labellum. Photo by Peter Adams.

Other breeders made *D. Delicatum* using deep purple-coloured *D. kingianum* plants combined with natural or early linebred *D. speciosum*, aiming for purple seedlings. Some seedlings were vigorous growers with mottled deep or fairly solid purple flowers. The presentation of the flowers has been inferior to the 'Butler 181' cross, and plants tended to become large and straggly, with canes >30 cm tall. Many thousands of the cross *D. kingianum* × *D. speciosum* have been produced and used for further hybridisation. As far as can be ascertained, the solitary plant of *D. Speciokingianum* exhibited in 1892 was not subsequently used in producing further hybrids.

Discussion

Natural Hybrids

Problems with the identification and relationships of the two main initial sites of *D. × delicatum*, at Main Range Queensland and Mt Alum New South Wales, are understandable, as the species distribution and variation were incompletely documented at the time. The Mt Alum site has special significance and was worthy of a management program to maintain both species and hybrid diversity. A few historical plants with provenance have been kept in collections, e.g. *D. × delicatum* 'Hilda Curtis' and *D. × delicatum* 'Spring Bluff' from southern Queensland, and some plants labelled *D. Kestevenii*, and *D. × delicatum* plants from Carnarvon Gorge.

Contrary to early views that the hybrid did not occur in the gap of 560 km between the two initial sites (used by Rupp to argue the plants were different taxa), scattered hybrids have since been reported by enthusiasts at many sites in northern New South Wales.

Dendrobium Speciokingianum

The attempt to elucidate *post hoc* the likely identity of parents of Lawrence's hybrid suggests a different parentage from that intended and recorded for *D. Speciokingianum*. It is fairly clear from Rupp and Hunt (1947) and supported by Adams and Lawson (1995) and Adams et al. (2021) that the parent originally identified as *D. kingianum* var. *album* was a natural hybrid between *D. kingianum* and *D. speciosum*, i.e. *D. × delicatum*. This is a likely parent for the hybrid rather than a high-quality white *D. kingianum* plant, which was not likely to be present in England at the time. The *D. × delicatum* was imported from Australia, but its exact origin and history are uncertain. The nearest potential site for *D. × delicatum* where the two parent species grow together and are accessible from the early Sydney settlement was Mt Alum, Bulahdelah, which is the northern limit of *D. speciosum* var. *speciosum*. This is the most likely region for the origin of the plant incorrectly identified as *D. kingianum* var. *album*, and the illustration (Fig. 1) is similar to the forms found there.

Key points in the description of *D. Speciokingianum* that support *D. × delicatum* as a parent are the plants' resemblance to *D. speciosum*, the hybrid style, the purple spotting and shape of the labellum, the white flower colour, relatively large flowers, and the long pedicels. These are all expected from a greater influence of *D. speciosum* in the *D. × delicatum* parent compared with a *D. kingianum* parent.

The history of breeding *D. kingianum* style hybrids shows that a hybrid parent with ≥ 50% *D. kingianum* has a dominant effect, particularly on colour and rounded shape compared with a hybrid with 25% *D. kingianum* (Upton 1989, Adams 2020a,b). *Dendrobium Delicatum* has a variety of mauve to pale purple tinted to solid colours, sometimes on sepal and petal tips with a white centre, or with the centre mauve only later in the flower life, indicating the presence of active *D. kingianum* colour genes, whereas *D. Jane Leaney*, with 25% *D. kingianum*, produces some pure white flowers. Flower counts in the various hybrids are very variable, not useful for identification, and generally follow the lower counts of the non-*D. speciosum* parent. The final indicator of the parentage suggested here from the 19th Century accounts is the statement that the *D. Speciokingianum* plant "closely resembled *D. kingianum* var. *album* B.S. Williams" (Anonymous 1896a).

Implications for Nomenclature

There is considerable evidence from a review of illustrations and descriptions, and from the knowledge of distribution, history and species characteristics, that the parentage stated for the cross producing the first Australian hybrid, *D. Speciokingianum*, was incorrectly specified, and was most likely *D. speciosum* × *D. × delicatum*, (equivalent to the hybrid registered by the RHS in 1964 as *D. Jane Leaney*) rather than *D. speciosum* × *D. kingianum*. Many of the complex issues in the registration of *D. Speciokingianum*, for example, precedence, rank, the establishment of a grex name and nothospecies and nothovarieties, may require re-interpretation given the confusion surrounding the identity of the parents used in the original cross. The registered hybrid name *D. Speciokingianum* implies the parentage of *D. speciosum* and *D. kingianum* and using it to replace the widely accepted name *D. Delicatum* is, perhaps, undesirable given the former involves one parent that was a hybrid. The nomenclatural implications for cultivated plants that flow from the confused parentage of *D. Speciokingianum* may warrant further exploration.

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