Variability of the cultivated forms of Vanda coerulea

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Variability of the cultivated forms of *Vanda coerulea* Griff. ex Lindl.

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**Abstract:** By virtue to its size, shape, texture but mostly because of its blue flowers, one species holds a very special place in the fascinating world of orchids: the legendary *Vanda coerulea*. So it is surprising that the great variability of this species is quite often underestimated or even unknown by collectors because of the standardization of the plants offered for sale. After a brief presentation of the species as well as a mention of its importance in hybridization, this article proposes to profile some of the less known forms of *Vanda coerulea*.

**Key words:** *Vanda coerulea* ; *Vanda coerulea* f. alba ; *Vanda f. delicata* ; *Vanda coerulea* f. rogersii ; hybridisation.

**Résumé.-** De par la taille, la forme, la texture et principalement en raison de la couleur bleue de ses fleurs, une espèce occupe une place tout à fait particulière dans le monde fascinant des orchidées : c’est le mythique *Vanda coerulea*. Néanmoins, le caractère très variable de cette espèce est bien souvent sous estimé ou ignoré par les amateurs en raison de l'uniformisation des plantes proposées de nos jours à la vente. À la suite d’une présentation succincte de l'espèce ainsi que d'une évocation de son importance en hybridation, cet article propose de décrire quelques unes des formes les moins connues de *Vanda coerulea*.

**Mots clés.-** *Vanda coerulea* ; *Vanda coerulea* f. alba ; *Vanda f. delicata* ; *Vanda coerulea* f. rogersii ; hybridation.

**Presentation of the species**

*Vanda coerulea* is a species of tropical mountains and hills found at altitudes between 800 and 2000 m. At those altitudes night temperatures are usually between 7 to 10 degrees but can occasionally drop to 0 degree Celsius. It grows on deciduous trees at 3 to 12 m above ground. You can find it in North Burma (Myanmar), in South and South-West Yunnan in China, North-East India (Khasia Hills, Assam) and North Thailand.

It’s a hardy plant and older specimens can attain 1.5 m or even 2 m but a 30 cm plant can easily flower. Compared with other Vandas, its leaves stand at a wider angle in relation to the stem which makes the plant actually easy to recognize for a practiced eye. Its long inflorescence carries 6 to 15 large and uniquely textured flowers.

This plant was previously in Appendix 1 of CITES, (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna) but it has been since removed from the Appendix 1 due to the discovery of new populations, especially in the Himalaya region.

It still survives in a few isolated areas and sadly, one can still find wild uprooted *Vanda coerulea* for sale along the roads in Shan State in Myanmar (Burma). Then, these plants often end up in specialized markets along the Thai-Burmese border or even in Bangkok itself.

**The exceptional contribution of *Vanda coerulea* in hybridization**

Blue being a very rare color amongst epiphyte orchids, *Vanda coerulea* has played a major role in hybridization and has spawned every blue Vandas with big flowers as well as many intergeneric hybrids (*Ascocenda*, *Vascostylis*, etc...). Furthermore, the large color palette of this species has been often used by hybridizers: Azure blue, lavender, dark blues, purple, violet, pink, white as well as everything in between. But the contribution of *Vanda Coerulea* to hybridization doesn't stop at color: *Vanda coerulea* is tolerant of cold and floriferous with numerous and large flowers lasting up to a month organized along an inflorescence well above the leaves. The tessellated flowers of many hybrids are inherited from *Vanda coerulea* which also has a tendency to transmit its entire characteristic to its descendants.

Some hybrids are so similar to the original that only an examination of the side lobes allows to tell them apart: *Vanda coerulea* side lobes project backwards and end with very fine sharp hooks.
The species in its natural habitat

In its natural habitat *Vanda coerulea* flowers between July and September. The flowers usually measure 5 to 10 cm in diameter. In its natural biotope the plants' leaves are shorter and narrower than the plants grown in culture. Flowers are often less tessellated and the petals often twisted backwards.

Relatively speaking, plants with very large flowers, very tessellated and intense colors are somewhat removed from plants found in their natural habitat.

Two natural hybrids occur in nature: *Vanda x amonea* when hybridized with *Vanda tessellata* and *Vanda x charlesworthii*, a mix with *Vanda bensonii*.

The "improved" forms of *Vanda coerulea*

But for hybridizers, *Vanda coerulea* flowers do have some defects: both petals and sepals are far longer than they are wide and petals twisted on their axis leaves large windows between the different floral pieces. Also many plants have dull colors and are barely tessellated.

Though exceptional subjects were send to England as early as the end of the XIXth century, David L. Grove notes in his volume on *Vanda* that it wasn't until the mid 60s than the Thais started to select plants with remarkable qualities from Thailand and Burma. By 1975 plants bred for the specificities of certain collectors were available: with large flowers (9 to 12 cm, even sometimes close to 15 cm), intense colors, strongly tessellated, sepals and petals round and not twisted, plants who could flower up to 5 times a year, with more than 25 flowers regularly spaced and distributed along 2 inflorescences.

Outside of the common blue plants, the three other principal forms of the species are:

**Vanda coerulea f. delicata**

The uncommon *Vanda coerulea f. delicata* is the rose-coloured form of the species. It is often incorrectly referred to as *Vanda coerulea* Pink or more rarely *Vanda coerulea rosea*. The flowers of this form are usually less tessellated and pastel-coloured, with a lip of a more intense pink. But plants with fuchsia flowers, clearly tessellated also exist.

Though originally recessive this form was used intensely by hybridizers. Many of the most spectacular pink modern hybrids come directly from this form.

**Vanda coerulea f. rogersii**

*Vanda coerulea f. rogersii* is a common and very attractive form, with almost white flowers with traces of generally indistinct blue.

Because of the wide and fluctuating color spectrum found in *Vanda Coerulea*, some forms are not always clearly identifiable. A perfect example would be distinguishing *rogersii* from *semi-alba*, a form with white petals and sepals and a violet-blue lip. The difference between the two forms is often very small and can even change from one flowering to the next on the same plant.

**Vanda coerulea f. alba (Vanda coerulea f. luwangalba)**

The whole flower, lip included, is pure white and remarkably textured. This magnificent and very rare form is the most looked after and most expensive of all *Vanda coerulea* forms.

It can be easily confused with a plant of the typical form whose flowers became white a few days after losing its pollinia. On a *Vanda coerulea f. alba*’s scape every flower is immaculate white right from their opening.

In August 2008, this form was registered by Rajkumar Kishor, from India, under the name *Vanda coerulea f. luwangalba* in homage to Luwangba Arabam who collected and cultivated this form in the State of Manipur in North East India.
Literature cited