

Paradrymonia densa

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Like an adolescent growing out of his clothes, *Paradrymonia densa* had to leave Marianne Gershon's light cart due to its increasing size and gawkiness. (Saintpaulias claim most of her growing space.) She donated the plant to the sales table at our monthly meeting of the local Liberty Bell Chapter. When I first saw those intense plum-colored stems and leaf backs, love was in the air. I thought it would be an attractive plant to add to my stable of competitive plants that I enter at the Philadelphia Flower Show. I nervously glanced around and noticed others eyeing it too. Fortunately, years of shopping at orchid plants sales have taught me to be focused. No longer a passive shopper, I now know that the first person to lay hands on the plant becomes the owner. So I swept in for a closer look and never let go.

My friend Marianne later told me that she had picked up the plant at a Delaware Chapter meeting in April of 2004. "It was so pretty" that she had to have it. The plant was small, perhaps 3" or 4" tall, but heavily variegated with red-backed leaves. It bloomed for her during the winter of 2004-5. After taking *Paradrymonia densa* home, I grew it in my basement on a light cart under two fluorescent tubes lit for 14 hours per day. Later I moved it to a first floor light cart next to an east-facing window where it received additional light. Since I wick most of my gesneriads, I use a light, porous mix and grow them in plastic pots. I usually follow Kartuz' formula: 4 parts sphagnum peat moss, 4 parts perlite, and 1 part vermiculite, with 1 tablespoon of dolomite limestone plus 1 quart of water (this really cuts down on the dust). To wick, I use 1 part of Kartuz' mix and cut it with 1 part perlite. I fertilize with various brand names using 1/4 strength solutions. Air circulation and humidity are very important so I keep a fan going all the time while the plants are perched above a pool of water. (A plastic wrap on the light cart also works well.)

This fibrous-rooted plant from the American tropics appears to be a slow grower, reluctantly sending up pairs of opposite leaves. Young plants have an eye-catching variegated leaf pattern exhibiting various shades of green that can show great contrast. The center of the leaf is black-green, the middle is silver-green, and the edge is olive – all with a two-toned plum-colored back. The ribs and veins are dark burgundy. But this youthful beauty does not last. As the leaves grow (up to 9" long plus a 5" stem), the intense variegation fades leaving a more muted green coloration like green marble with burgundy ribs, but those irresistible plum backs remain. What it loses in cuteness it makes up for with its mature architectural look.

Weeks before the convention last July, my 12" tall plant started to flower in its 5" pot. Fuzzy calyces formed a tight mound about the size of half an orange at the base of the plant. The calyces were a deep reddish plum color while the hairy, tubular flowers were cream colored. Several flowers were always poking out and they lasted for days. This furry ball of calyces and flowers, along with the protruding plum-colored stems and green leaves, was an attractive sight. The plant had the makings of a great show entry. And, typically, flowering started to decline when I needed it the most, but I was determined to share this thing of beauty even if it had fewer flowers.



Paradyrmonia densa exhibited by Stephen Maciejewski
at the 2006 Convention Flower Show (photos by Bob Stewart)



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It was a handsome plant, and since I had never seen one before, I thought it probably would still be of interest as an entry in the show. So I removed it from its bright, warm and protected Philadelphia environment and took it for a six-hour bumpy ride in an air-conditioned car to the convention in Rochester. Add another two days in an air-conditioned room, and it was not looking very happy – nor were the other plants I had brought to show. I was feeling a little discouraged and had finally decided not to enter the *Paradrymonia densa* as the changing environments had taken their toll. I was fortunate to have Karyn Cichocki, a passionate grower, as my next-door hotel room neighbor. Since this was the first convention I ever brought plants to, I decided that I needed some discussion and support. I knocked on her door and asked for assistance. She was very enthusiastic about checking out my plants. I presented her with three groups of plants: the rejects, the questionable ones, and those I felt comfortable with entering. She immediately noticed the *Paradrymonia densa* in the reject category and insisted that I enter it. She then provided some suggestions about how I could do a quick makeover with the artistic use of scissors.

When I brought my plants down to enter in the show, they received a hearty reception, especially the *Paradrymonia densa*. A number of people even came over to admire it. Several said they had never seen it in flower. The entering process went very smoothly. There were no long lines and there was lots of table space available for that final bit of grooming. A number of knowledgeable people were also around to answer any questions. I entered the *Paradrymonia densa* in Section C – New World Gesneriads in Flower – Fibrous-Rooted, Class 19 – Other Fibrous-Rooted Gesneriads, and received a Third Place Ribbon. The judges scored it an 88 and noted that they were pleased to see a "mature specimen". Perhaps I should have entered it in Section G – Lesser-Known Gesneriads Seldom Grown or Seen in Shows, but I wasn't familiar with this class. While the plant didn't get a blue ribbon, it did spark interest in this species and thus fulfilled its educational role.

It's exciting to go hunting for "Blue", but one of the purposes of these shows is to share information about the plants we love. So let's grow and groom our plants the best we can and then take them out to shows more often and leave the rating game to the judges. Today the flowers are long gone and the plant is looking a bit ragged, but many new plantlets are emerging from the base. Soon, someone else will have the opportunity while attending a plant sale to say "it was so pretty" that they had to have it.

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