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Sinningia tubiflora

The Sweet Smell of Success!

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I fell in love with *Sinningia tubiflora* immediately upon encountering it because of its spicy fragrance. In my opinion, it is the most fragrant of all the gesneriads. Ruth Katzenberger, the hybridizer of *Sinningia* 'Dollbaby', was an early mentor and introduced me to this plant. She taught me that this plant requires very good light to keep it from becoming leggy. I grew some very good specimens of it in the early eighties, but lost the plant when I left it outdoors too long and it froze. I had been meaning to acquire another plant but didn't until a few years ago.

Unfortunately, how I acquired it is not a happy story. About five years ago, I received a call that Ruth Katzenberger was going into a nursing home in Florida. Since there was no family in New York, the house would be sold. I was urged to visit the greenhouse on the property to remove any plants that I would like. Among the plants rescued was *Sinningia tubiflora*. It was in a large, tall pot, but was planted at the bottom in about five inches of soil. It had to grow quite a bit to get above the rim of the pot – perhaps this had been done to support the tall stems.

Since my time was at a premium, it remained in this pot for quite awhile. Each year the plant was placed in the greenhouse from late fall until late April/early May. For the remainder of the year, it was placed out on the deck. Retirement in May 2003 provided me with the opportunity to grow the plant the way I knew was possible. With any luck, it would be at its peak for the convention show on Long Island.

In February 2004 when I noticed the plant was beginning to break dormancy, I knew that this was the proper moment to repot. I had a saucer-shaped, clay-colored plastic pot that was the same diameter as the pot in which it was growing. I dumped out the contents. *Sinningia tubiflora* does not develop with age into one large tuber, but instead develops a bunch of small, connected tubers. Upon repotting Ruth's plant, many tubers broke apart, but this allowed me to place them as I wished. There were sufficient tubers to plant almost the entire surface of the new container just below the soil level. The plant was placed where it would receive the strongest light available in the greenhouse. Each day additional growths appeared from the many tubers. I began to be concerned that the light in the greenhouse was not strong enough to keep the plant compact. It was still too early to place it outdoors. I held back on water and fertilizer to slow it down. Finally the weather was warm enough to risk placing it outside.

That was the very end of April. The frost-free date on Long Island is May 15th. It had been a mild spring so far and I thought it worth the risk. At worst, I would have to bring the plant indoors overnight only a few times. When one takes a plant out to be placed in full sun, it must be acclimated or it will burn. Over a period of 5 to 7 days, the plant was moved to locations with stronger light until it was in full sun. The location was on one of the perimeter benches of a deck. The plant was turned, watered and fertilized as required by conditions. It grew very well and flower spikes began to appear. I began to fret that the timing was not going to work out and the peak would

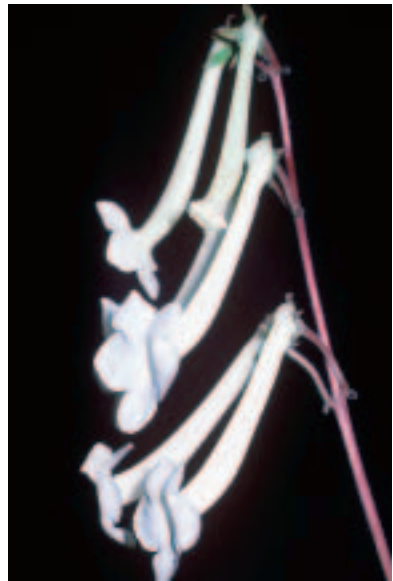
be too early. A little later, I had the opposite fear that it wasn't growing as quickly as I had thought, and it would peak after the show.

Monday, July 5th arrived – time to prepare for the trip to convention the next day. I inserted two stakes on opposite sides of the plant and tied up the stems. The plant was too tall for the back of my station wagon so it was placed on the floor on the front passenger side. The rest is a matter of record. The plant was in top condition for show and was recognized despite the tough competition. It was great winning in my own backyard with Ruth's plant. It took me 29 years to win Best in Show at a convention flower show. It couldn't have happened under better circumstances.

Now you know the secret of growing a specimen plant of *Sinningia tubiflora*. Realize however that you may have to make adjustments for geographic location and weather conditions. On a recent trip to Brazil, all my fellow plant enthusiasts and I came to understand how important it is to learn the cultural requirements of all of the *Sinningias* because they vary a great deal. Learn their individual requirements. Apply them, and you, too, can experience the sweet smell of success.



Ben Paternoster's award-winning smile and Best in Show entry



Close-up of fragrant flowers of *Sinningia tubiflora*

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