Phragmipedium schlimii

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The type: Colombia. Santander: Ocaña, in January 1852, Schlim found this "vocation" for orchids and the orchid business, which would become the central axis of his life. Back to Brussels in December 1844, Linden made plans to found his first company in partnership with Nicolas (Nicholas) Funck (1816–1863) entered the orchidology scene in 1841, when he accompanied Jean Jules Linden (1817–1898) (his half-brother) on his third exploration of the American tropics. They collected plants in Colombia and Venezuela, with a short stop in Jamaica, until the end of 1844. It was during this trip that Linden realized his 'vocation' for orchids and the orchid business, which would become the central axis of his life. Back to Brussels in December 1844, Linden made plans to found his first company in partnership with Nicolas (Nicholas) Funck (1816–1896), the Etablissement d’Introduction de Plantes, which would be officially launched in January 1845. Meantime, he dispatched his partner, Funck, and his half-brother (Schlim) on a new collecting trip in South America. When exploring the Colombian Eastern Cordillera near Ocaña, in January 1852, Schlim found what Reichenbach (1854a) would eventually describe as “one of the most beautiful discoveries of the well-deserved traveler Schlim, Mr. Linden’s half-brother.” Linden (in Linden et al. 1855) did not share his excitement in considering that “Selenipedium schlimii, though much more modest in its proportions [than Phragmipedium caudatum], must not fear any comparison in regard to the delicacy of its form and colors.” In the same year, 1854, Reichenbach provided an expanded and improved description of the species, together with additional details about its origins and an illustration, in the first volume of his Xenia Orchidacea (Reichenbach 1854b). Here he also provided another collecting date (February) and a more exact elevation of the original population discovered by Schlim, at 4,000 feet (about 1,200 m).

Due to the exact description of the original collecting locality provided by Schlim, Hermann Wagener (1823–1887) managed to collect a few additional specimens two years later, and to send them alive to Europe. In Reichenbach’s herbarium in Vienna there is material from both collections, together with specimens grown by Linden and the celebrated horticulturist, Consul Gustav Wilhelm Schiller (1803–1870), in his renowned collection at Ovelgönne, near Hamburg. It is likely that the description prepared by Reichenbach for Xenia Orchidacea was therefore based on a mix of different plants. Nevertheless, the accompanying plate was prepared entirely from one of Schlim’s specimens (Reichenbach 1854). The original, hand-colored illustration of Selenipedium schlimii shows a flower with almost white sepalas and petals, faintly flushed with rose at the base, with a red lip and bright yellow staminode. The species is obviously variable as to flower color. The amply illustrated monograph by Gruss (2014) presents photographs of more than 20 variants in the general scheme of Phragmipedium schlimii color, ranging from almost pure white (var. albiflorum Linden, 1874; f. albiflorum O. Gruss, 1996) to striped with purple along the veins of the petals, to white with rose lip, to a form with almost solid red lip and the sepalas and petals boldly blotched with bright red at the base. It was rather ironic that in their informative papers on the Phragmipedium schlimii complex, Braem and Tesón (2016) interpreted the oxidation process that frequently darkens the lead white used to hand-paint the old botanical illustrations (eventually transforming the pigment to a solid brown color), and which also affected numerous original copies of Xenia Orchidacea, as “another flower coloration which [...] must have been added at a later date.”

Natural populations of Phragmipedium schlimii have been traditionally known exclusively from central Colombia, not only from the original localities around.
Ocaña in the eastern Cordillera, but also from the central Cordillera in the vicinity of Medellín (Gruss 2014). Recent claims would extend the geographic range of the species to southern Colombia and to within Ecuadorean borders. The habitat of Phragmipedium schlimii is apparently restricted to the middle elevation range of the Colombian Cordilleras (south to Ecuador?), between about 3,900 and 6,200 feet (1,200–1,900 m).

Wes Higgins and Paula Viveros described Phragmipedium manzurii from a plant with distinctly colored green sepals and petals, and the petals tinged with purple, originally collected in the department of Santander in central Colombia (Higgins and Viveros 2009). They compared Phragmipedium manzurii with Phragmipedium fischeri, a quite distant, autogamous species in Phragmipedium subgenus Micropetalum, mostly distinguishing the new taxon by the color of the flowers, the rounded, shortly emarginate staminodal shield, provided with a central low ridge, and the lip with the apex turned up in front. Populations of Phragmipedium manzurii are exclusively known from the Cordilleras, in the same regions where Phragmipedium schlimii also occurs.

We follow here Cribb and Purver (2017) and other authors, who consider Phragmipedium manzurii conspecific with Phrag. schlimii, at whichever subspecific rank should it be treated. Our personal examination of a large number of living plants of both Phragmipedium schlimii and Phrag. manzurii failed to reveal critical features useful to maintain them as distinct.

It is curious to note that such spectacular and highly sought after orchid plants may have for such a long time escaped the attention of collectors. After the publication of Phragmipedium schlimii in 1854, 125 years elapsed before another species of the same group, Phragmipedium besseae, was discovered in Peru. In the last 20 years, five more species and three natural hybrids have been added to the subgenus Micropetalum, even though not all of them are actually recognized as good taxa.

REFERENCES