



FLOWER POWER



Singapore's Orchid Diplomacy

Singapore's diplomatic efforts may take several forms, including naming orchid hybrids after foreign dignitaries. **Rebecca Tan** tells us more.

(Facing page) The *Paravanda* Nelson Mandela, named after the former president of South Africa, bears flowers that have a bright greenish-yellow hue with a reddish tinge, resembling the colours of the South African flag. *Courtesy of the National Parks Board.*

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In August 2021, during a visit to Singapore, United States Vice President Kamala Harris was welcomed to the Istana by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. As a welcome gift, she was presented with a spray of purplish-pink orchids named after her, the *Papilionanda* Kamala Harris (*Vanda* Kulwadee Fragrance × *Papilionanthe hookeriana*).¹

Whenever world leaders visit a foreign country in an official capacity, they are usually given tokens of appreciation and enjoy tours of the country's attractions. In Singapore, however, some receive something special – an orchid hybrid named after them. This initiative – known as “orchid diplomacy” – serves as a gesture of friendship to promote goodwill between Singapore and other countries and plays an important role in building bilateral ties, as it is accorded to dignitaries such as royalty, heads of state and heads of government.²

Why orchids specifically? And why hybrids? Orchids, which belong to the family Orchidaceae, are chosen for their vibrant colours, hardiness and resilience. They help to project a strong image of Singapore. Hybrids, created by crossing two different breeds of parent plant species, reflect Singapore's multicultural heritage and globally oriented outlook.³ The parent plants may even be hybrids themselves.

Selected orchid hybrids are named after visiting heads of state and heads of government as well as celebrities and important guests to the Singapore Botanic Gardens.⁴ This tradition dates back to 1956, and today there are over 200 of such orchids in the National Orchid Garden at the Singapore Botanic Gardens.⁵ VIP orchids, including those named in honour of the wives of heads of state and heads of government, are housed in the VIP Orchid Garden, while celebrity orchids can be viewed at the Celebrity Orchid Garden.

The first VIP orchid is the *Aranthera* Anne Black (*Arachnis* Maggie Oei × *Renanthera coccinea*), named after Lady Anne Black in 1956. She was the wife of Robert Black, a former governor of Singapore.⁶ This hybrid makes a good cut flower as older flowers in a spray do not wither when new

ones bloom. Following independence in 1965, Singapore formalised the procedures for the naming of VIP orchids.

Cultivating Orchid Hybrids

The creation of orchid hybrids is undertaken by the Orchid Hybridisation Programme managed by the Singapore Botanic Gardens.⁷ Various characteristics are taken into consideration when hybridising orchids, such as large and long-lasting flowers, high flower count, good arrangement of sprays, and the “look” of something new. However, not all crosses succeed due to factors like infertile parent plants or rot in the seed pods.⁸

The hybrid breeding process entails five steps: (1) deciding the type of orchid hybrid and then searching for the “parents” with the right characteristics; (2) transferring the pollen from the male parent to the female parent for fertilisation; (3) sowing the orchid seeds in a culture medium containing nutrients so that the seeds can germinate and grow into seedlings; (4) growing the seedlings in flasks for six to 12 months before they are transferred to pots in a nursery; and (5) waiting for the plants to

flower, which usually takes two to three years of growing the orchids in pots.⁹

According to Peggy Tan, former president of the Orchid Society of South East Asia, a toothpick is used to harvest the pollen from a flower, which is immediately placed onto the stigma of another flower. If pollination succeeds, the flower will fade but remains on the stem until a seed pod develops several weeks later. However, if an orchid’s resultant flowers are defective, then the plant may be discarded.¹⁰

Yam Tin Wing, senior researcher of orchid breeding at the Singapore Botanic Gardens, noted in 2009 that only 10 percent of orchid hybrids were found “suitable to be used in orchid-naming ceremonies”. “It’s like waiting for a baby to be born,” he said. “You don’t know what it will look like, or the characteristics it will have. Some orchids may look good, but are weak plants. Others may grow well but not have any flowers.”¹¹

Orchid hybrids take anywhere between two and six years to flower from the day the parents are crossed. For example, the *Aranda* Lee Kuan Yew (*Arachnis hookeriana* × *Vanda* Golden Moon), named after Singapore’s founding prime

minister when he passed away in 2015, took four years to bloom after its parents were crossed.¹²

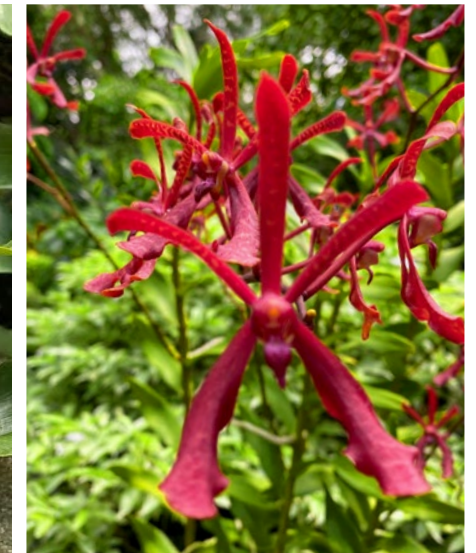
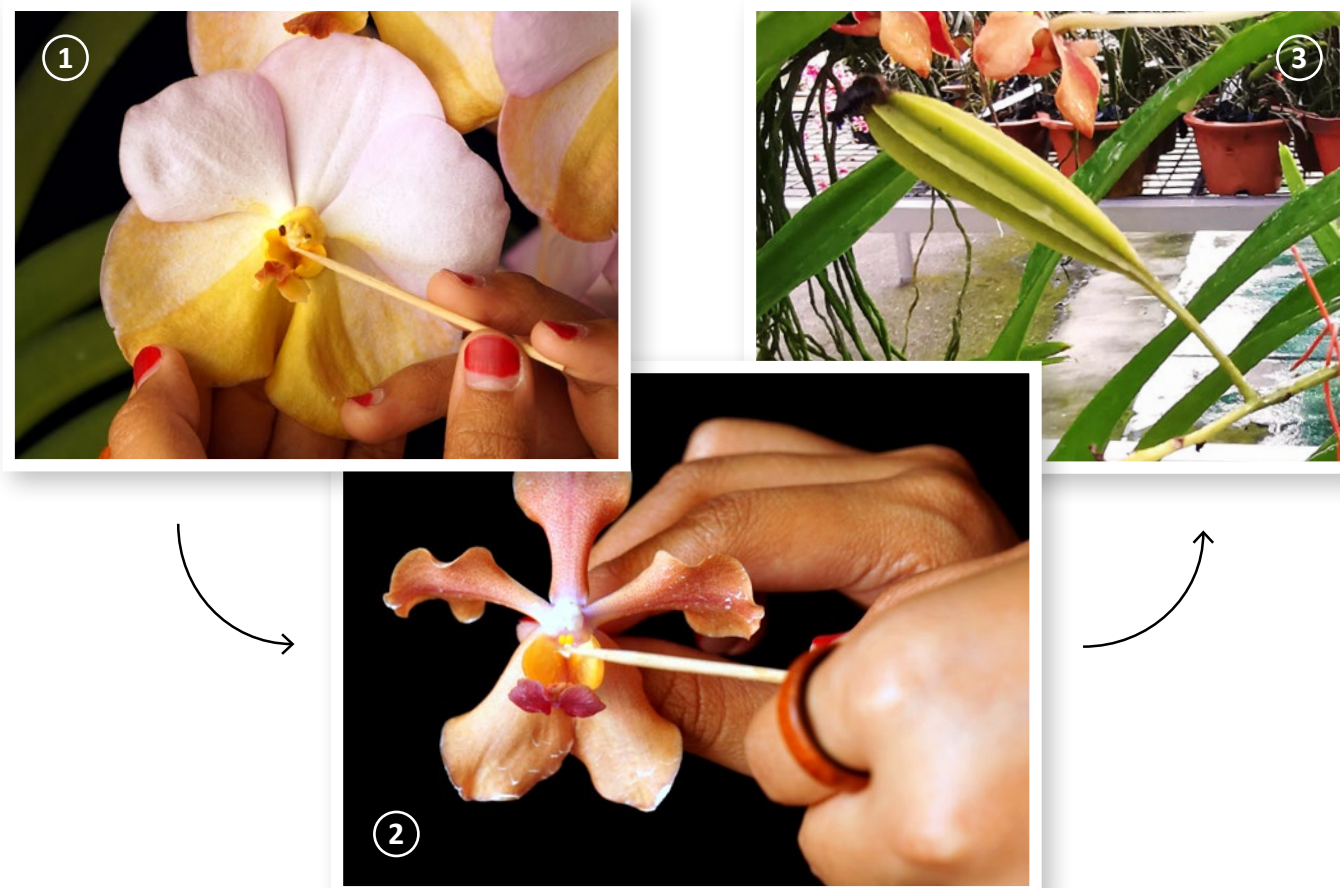
To ensure there are always orchid hybrids (“Very Important Plants”) available for naming after VIPs, the Botanic Gardens stores hundreds of hybrids that have bloomed but remain unnamed.¹³ According to a *Straits Times* report in 1984, some orchids “may bloom in obscurity for as much as a decade before getting a name – as they flower at a time when no celebrity is visiting. But a lucky few are christened in their first bloom”.¹⁴

To conserve the VIP orchid collections, these orchids are sent to the Gardens’ Micropropagation Laboratory for mass propagation, and subsequently to the National Orchid Garden’s nursery to be nurtured till they flower. These flowering plants are then used for displays and further propagation when stocks are low.¹⁵

Selecting VIP Orchids

Several months before a notable dignitary is set to visit Singapore, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) provides the Sin-

During the pollination process, (1) pollen is carefully removed from the pollen plant and (2) transferred to the seed plant. (3) If fertilisation succeeds, a seed pod will develop several weeks later. *Courtesy of the National Parks Board.*



gapore Botanic Gardens with a dossier on the visitor. Based on the information, several orchids are shortlisted. The recommendations are then sent to the MFA and the visiting dignitary’s representatives.¹⁶ Simon Tan, Assistant Director of the National Orchid Garden, commented in 2015 that “the MFA advises [the garden] on taboo colours” and preferred colours. The Singapore Botanic Gardens will then choose the orchids according to these requirements.¹⁷

Much care is also taken in selecting an orchid that befits the dignitary it will be named after. For example, the *Paravanda*

(Left and above) The first VIP orchid is the *Aranthera* Anne Black, named in 1956 after the wife of Robert Black, former governor of Singapore. *Photos by and courtesy of Jimmy Yap.*

(Below) President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, at the National Orchid Garden, 1997. The *Paravanda* Nelson Mandela was named after him during his visit to Singapore. *Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*





(Facing page) During the visit by Prince William and Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge, to the National Orchid Garden on 11 September 2012, the royal couple was presented with an orchid named after them, the *Vanda William Catherine*. Courtesy of the National Parks Board.

(Above) Queen Elizabeth II touring the Singapore Botanic Gardens, 1972. Accompanying her are (from left) Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of National Development Cheng Tong Fatt, Minister for Law and National Development E.W. Barker, and Acting Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens A.G. Alphonso. The queen had an orchid named in her honour, the *Dendrobium Elizabeth*. Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

(Left) The *Dendrobium Elizabeth* has twisted petals and the sepals are yellow with light greyish-purple streaks. Photo by and courtesy of Jimmy Yap.

Nelson Mandela (*Papilionanda Mas Los Angeles* × *Paraphalaenopsis labukensis*), named in honour of the anti-apartheid leader and president of South Africa when he visited Singapore in March 1997, has “a bright greenish-yellow hue with a reddish tinge, resembling the colours of the South African flag”. It won the second prize at the 18th World Orchid Conference held in France in March 2005.¹⁸

Another example is the *Dendrobium Memoria Princess Diana* (*Dendrobium Pattaya Beauty* × *Dendrobium Fairy Wong*), christened on 22 September 1997, a month after Princess Diana’s death.¹⁹ Yam noted that the orchid was white, a “very regal or royal colour” that also reflected the late Princess of Wales’ efforts to promote peace, such as by banning land mines. He added that the flower “has a tinge of pink on its petals which make it seem warm and approachable, just like the personality of the Princess”.²⁰

In yet another example, the orchids *Aranda Lee Kuan Yew* and *Vanda Kwa Geok Choo* (*Vanda Amelita Ramos* × *Vanda Harvest Time*) – named after the founding prime minister and his wife – were chosen to match in terms of colour, form and stature. They also share common species in their lineages.²¹

Said then Minister for National Development Khaw Boon Wan in a blog post on

24 March 2015: “For some time, we have been looking out for a suitable orchid hybrid to name after Mr Lee. NParks [National Parks Board] officers who have staffed him on his many visits to the SBG [Singapore Botanic Gardens] have a good sense of what he enjoyed and liked amongst the flora and fauna.”²²

VIPs may also have a say in which orchid is named after them. Then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher personally selected her orchid, the *Dendrobium Margaret Thatcher* (*Dendrobium Concham* × *Dendrobium lasianthera*), during her visit to Singapore in April 1985. Chua Sian Eng, Commissioner of Parks and Recreation, explained to Mrs Thatcher that “the orchid was chosen for its vigour and growth”. Sporting petals that resemble antelope horns, the orchid won three prizes at the Singapore Orchid Show in 1987.²³

When Japan’s Crown Prince Naruhito (now Emperor) wed Masako Owada in June 1993, then President of Singapore Wee Kim Wee presented the royal couple with an orchid that had been specially flown to Tokyo to commemorate the wedding. This was a white orchid, the *Dendrobium Masako Kotaishi Hidenka* (also known as *Dendrobium Her Imperial Highness the Crown Princess Masako*; *Dendrobium Singa Snow* × *Dendrobium Subang*). The crown princess had selected

this particular hybrid after viewing photos of different orchids.²⁴

Once an orchid is named, it is registered with the Royal Horticultural Society in London, the international registration authority for orchid hybrids. VIPs are presented with the orchid’s official birth certificate – with details such as the hybrid’s parents, appearance, date of pollination and flowering – and in some cases they get to keep the orchid too.²⁵

If the VIPs wish to grow their namesake orchid in their home country, the Singapore Botanic Gardens will provide them with the orchid plant cutting with flower stalks, accompanied by instructions on how to care for the orchid. The plant cutting is cushioned and secured in a box, and the flowers are wrapped. The Singapore Botanic Gardens also ensures that any plant import documents requested by the VIP’s home country are complete and in good order.²⁶

After being presented with their namesake orchids, dignitaries may go on to view other VIP orchids of significance to them. Following the unveiling of the *Vanda William Catherine* (*Vanda First and Last* × *Vanda Motes Toledo Blue*), Britain’s Prince William and Catherine, the Duchess of Cambridge, viewed the *Dendrobium Elizabeth* (*Dendrobium Mustard* × *Dendrobium Noor Aishah*; Noor Aishah is the wife of Singapore’s first president, Yusof



(Above) The *Papilionanda* Xi Jinping-Peng Liyuan is named in honour of the Chinese President and his wife. Photo by and courtesy of Jimmy Yap.

(Left) The *Dendrobium* Mahathir Siti Hasmah, a hybrid of *Dendrobium* Kiyoshi Blue and *Dendrobium* Pink Lips, is named after Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the former prime minister of Malaysia, and his wife, Tun Dr Siti Hasmah binti Haji Mohamad Ali. Photo by and courtesy of Jimmy Yap.

Ishak) and the *Dendrobium* Memoria Princess Diana, named after Prince William's grandmother and late mother respectively. Singapore was the royal couple's first stop in their Asia-Pacific tour to commemorate Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee in 2012.²⁷

Dignitaries may also enjoy other aspects of the Botanic Gardens during their visit. In November 2015, after the *Papilionanda* Xi Jinping-Peng Liyuan (*Vanda* Kulwadee Fragrance × *Papilionanthe* Miss Joaquim) was named in honour of the Chinese President and his wife, the couple enjoyed a four-course lunch at the Corner House restaurant in the Botanic Gardens. They were hosted by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his wife Ho Ching. The orchid has pink petals with fine red spots, an orangey-red prominent lip with dark red markings, and an orangey-yellow centre.²⁸

Non-VIP Orchids

The naming of orchids after prominent personalities has also been expanded to include not only royalty and dignitaries, but also celebrities and Singaporeans who have brought honour to the country.

In 2006, local singer Stefanie Sun became the first Singaporean celebrity to have an orchid named after her to honour her success as a recording artiste. Sun chose the pure white hybrid, which was named *Dendrobium* Stefanie Sun

(*Dendrobium* Memoria Princess Diana × *Dendrobium* *bigibbum* var. *superbum* [syn. *Dendrobium* *phalaenopsis*]). "It is such a special thing to have a flower named after you. And I thought the pure white orchid is very simple and elegant," she said.²⁹

And in recognition of Joseph Schooling's and Yip Pin Xiu's achievements at the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games respectively, the two athletes were honoured with their own orchids the following year. The *Dendrobium* Joseph Schooling (*Dendrobium* Elizabeth × *Dendrobium* Strattokai) has petals that are "yellow and slightly twisted while the sepals are greenish yellow", whereas Yip's orchid, the *Dendrobium* Yip Pin Xiu (*Dendrobium* Kathy Ong Mei Lee × *Dendrobium* Pink Lips), sports sepals that are "white with a faint blush of purple while the white petals are infused with magenta".³⁰

International celebrities who have orchids named after them include Hong Kong superstar Jackie Chan, singers Elton John and Ricky Martin, operatic tenor Andrea Bocelli, Korean actors Kwon Sang Woo and Bae Yong Jun, and even fashion designer Michael Kors. Apparently, Chan was so happy with his *Dendrobium* Jackie Chan that "he put his arms around it, hugged, and took a picture with it" in 2005. The orchid petals have been described as looking like "the

nose of the dragon". The primatologist and anthropologist Jane Goodall also has an orchid that bears her name "in recognition of her extraordinary contributions to nature conservation and animal welfare."³¹

Orchids for Events and Milestones

Orchids may even be named after significant events held in Singapore, and these are placed in the Tan Hoon Siang Mist House at the National Orchid Garden. In January 1992, during the Fourth Asean Summit, wives of the Asean heads of government and ministers unveiled the *Dendrobium* Asean Lady (*Dendrobium* Garnet Beauty × *Dendrobium* *bigibbum* var. *superbum* [syn. *Dendrobium* *phalaenopsis*]).³² In December 1996, the *Mokara* WTO (*Mokara* Khaw Phaik Suan × *Ascocenda* Fortune East) was named after the inaugural World Trade Organisation Conference and its 5,000 delegates.³³

Orchids are also named to commemorate milestones. In 2015, when Singapore celebrated 50 years of independence, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong officially named the SG50 orchid the *Papilionanthe* Singapore Golden Jubilee orchid (*Papilionanthe* Snowdon × *Papilionanthe* Pojo). According to the National Parks Board, this orchid with purple and white flowers traces its lineage back to Singapore's national flower, the *Papilionanthe* Miss Joaquim (previously known as *Vanda* Miss Joaquim), "signify-

ing the nation's growth from strength to strength".³⁴

Also in the same year, the *Dendrobium* Golden Friendship (*Dendrobium* Memoria Olive Hu × *Dendrobium* *discolor*) was unveiled to celebrate 50 years of diplomatic ties between Singapore and Australia. It was grown from a Singaporean hybrid and an Australian species, and named by then Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott.³⁵

A Leader in Orchid Cultivation

Singapore's reputation for orchid cultivation dates to the 1950s. After the Japanese Occupation, businessman-lawyer Tan Hoon Siang, who later became president of the Malayan Orchid Society (today's Orchid Society of South East Asia), bred an orchid hybrid that put Singapore on the world map of orchid cultivation. The orchid seeds were then sown in the Singapore Botanic Gardens in 1949, flowering in 1952.

Tan named the flower *Papilionanda* Tan Chay Yan (previously known

as *Vanda* Tan Chay Yan; *Vanda* *dearei* × *Papilionanda* Josephine van Brero) after his late father, a commercial rubber planter from Melaka and a grandson of merchant and philanthropist Tan Tock Seng. The mauve and salmon-coloured orchid received a First Class Certificate from the Royal Horticultural Society at the Chelsea Flower Show in 1954. The orchid garnered much attention from orchid growers around the world and many came to see the orchids in Singapore. Tan himself also has an orchid in his honour – the *Papilionanda* Tan Hoon Siang, a hybrid of *Papilionanda* Josephine van Brero and *Vanda* Somsri Pink.³⁶

Since then, Singapore has become well known for its expertise in breeding orchids. The Singapore Botanic Gardens has intensified its acquisition of new species and hybrids, and set up a seed bank for conserving the genetic material of these orchids. These efforts help ensure the continued viability of "orchid diplomacy", and the richness of the collections in the National Orchid Garden.³⁷

To date, the Orchid Hybridisation Programme has produced more than 630 registered hybrids. Many of these hybrids, in addition to being potential VIP orchids, are also cultivated for use in landscaping and as potted plants.

While some might hanker after an orchid named after a favourite celebrity, these plants are, unfortunately, not for sale. The National Parks Board and Gardens by the Bay explained in 2015: "VIP orchids are named after individuals as a gesture of goodwill and friendship. Each named orchid is exclusive to the individual and is not for sale. This is what makes the orchid significant and special."³⁸ Hence, the only way to admire these beautiful flowers is to make a trip to the National Orchid Garden. ♦

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