Beginner's Guide to Lachenalia

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Beginner’s Guide to Lachenalia

This series of articles has featured several members of the Hyacinth family, mostly species native to South Africa. This article is on *Lachenalia*, a member of the Hyacinthaceae, and generally less succulent than the previously covered genera. Nonetheless, members of this genus are in the collection of many succulent plant growers. They are winter growers and for the most part winter flowering, giving a bright addition to any succulent collection when it is most needed.

The cultivation requirements for nearly all *Lachenalia* are the same. The plants prefer a porous, quick-draining potting medium and will do well in pure pumice or pumice mixed with any commercial potting mix. Coarse perlite will do nearly as well if pumice is not available. They want a dry summer, not needing any water, but preferring shade or other protection from extreme heat. Occasional very light dampening of the potting medium during the summer will help prevent desiccation in dry climates and gives the bulbs an early start in fall. Larger bulbs (greater than ¼ inch diameter) can be safely removed from the potting mix and stored in a cool dry location. Lachenalia are happy in surprisingly small pots. Many species will grow, flower and offset in 2 ¼ inch rose pots, needing repotting and separation every second or third year. When planted in slightly larger pots offsetting and growth of the offsets will be quicker. One of the offsetting species that started as a single seedling, but has now filled many 3 ½ inch pots is *Lachenalia latimerae* (Fig. 1). Several color forms of this species are available, and will appear from a single seed batch covering the range from nearly white to nearly light pink.

Propagation is easy as most species offset readily. Offsets are often separated at the beginning of the growing season and potted on but will do well when separated at any time. The anthers and stigma are exposed or nearly so in most species, as shown in the picture of *Lachenalia stayneri* (Fig. 2) making hybridization an easy task. A small brush will transfer pollen from one plant to another. The flowers are attractive to hummingbirds and random pollination will take place if multiple species are in flower and not protected. Many species are self-fertile.

Seeds are readily available for most species and can be grown as any winter growing plant. Although *Lachenalia* germination is relatively quick compared to many bulbs, it is leisurely at best compared to mesembs and cacti. Germination time can vary from a week to several months, depending on species and temperature. Stratification and smoke treatment are not required and appear to make no difference in germination success or rate.
Lachenalia have a long flowering season stretching from November to June (in California). One of the first to bloom is *Lachenalia rubida* (Fig. 3), often flowering in early December and in some years even as early as Thanksgiving. Like most Lachenalia, the blooms are long lasting and a single bulb can easily be in bloom for two weeks or more. Following closely behind is *Lachenalia reflexa* (Fig. 4), blooming in January and February. After the first two there is a rush of blooming Lachenalia with the order differing from year to year. One with the most curious flowers is *Lachenalia mutabilis* (Fig. 5) where long stems of pseudo flowers stick above the true flowers as a signal to potential pollinators of the nectaries below. Many species have scented flowers, with those of *Lachenalia comptonii* smelling strongly of coconut.

The most succulent-like of all the Lachenalia is *Lachenalia trichophylla* (Fig. 6) with single strongly textured leaves that are nearly flat against the ground. There is some variation in the length of the hairs projecting from the leaf surfaces, but even those with very short ones are worth seeking out. This is more of a challenge to grow successfully than most of the other species, but well worth the effort.

Lachenalia cultivars and selected color forms have been cultivated for many years. Figs. 7 & 8 show the most common form of *Lachenalia alooides* with red to purple tips. There is some variation in the length of the hairs projecting near the stem which leads to a variety of names, mostly *Lachenalia alooides* var. *tricolor* or var. *quadricolor*. Next to it is a pure yellow form, received and grown without a name. Other color forms are also in cultivation. In the recent monograph on the genus by Graham Duncan, several of these forms of *Lachenalia alooides* have been raised to specific status.

Lachenalia hybrids have been made for many years, but poorly documented. They appear on bulb price lists for a year or two and then seem to vanish, sometimes to reappear a few years later. Some of the more interesting Lachenalia hybrids come from Komoriya nursery, a well know purveyor of interesting Hippeastrum and Nerine on eBay. Like other Lachenalia hybrids their appearance on a sales list is ephemeral at best. Two examples shown, *Lachenalia* ‘Haru no nigore’ (Fig. 9) which like many Lachenalia has better and more interesting colors in bud than in flower and *Lachenalia* ‘The Nocturne’ (Fig. 10) which is unusual in form and color. Both of these appear to be primary hybrids between two species. We can hope for even more interesting hybrids from several growers in the future. Lachenalia may eventually follow the path of Cyclamen, Tulips and Haworthias into ever more exotic shapes and colors. Depending on your taste, this may or may not be a good thing.

7. Lachenalia alooides var. quadricolor.

8. Lachenalia alooides var. aurea.

9. Lachenalia 'Haru no nigore'.

REFERENCES

10. Lachenalia 'The Nocturne'. 