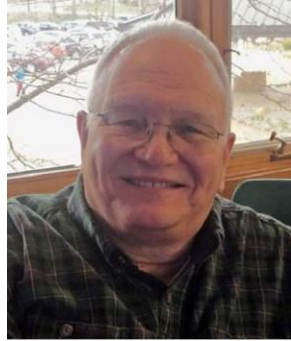


Japanese Wind Orchid, *Neofinetia falcata*

At the April meeting, member Doug Dowling gave a presentation on neo falcata and the ebb and flow system that he uses to maintain it. See the April Newsletter for his article on this system. May 2019



Doug Dowling

Cultivation of *Neofinetia falcata* was recorded as early as 1665, which makes it one of the oldest known orchids in cultivation. This plant has been cultivated in Japan for centuries with selected varieties held closely by the most enthusiastic collectors. Some can cost into the thousands of dollars even today. Many of these cultivars are what amounts to mutants by today's nomenclature. Plants come in all shapes and sizes, from tiny Kuroshinju, whose dwarf-sized growths measure only about an inch (2cm) across, to Kyokushou, whose "tiger" leaves spread over 7 inches (17.5 cm). Though accepted as high priced commodities in Japan, they are just now becoming popular here in America.

In the 18th century, Japan's Edo period, Shogun Tokugawa Ienari (1787 to 1837) became smitten with the *Neofinetia falcata*, thus becoming known as the 'Orchid of the Shoguns'. This delicate orchid was celebrated for its citruscoconut fragrance, activated at dusk. When found in the wild, these flowers were called "furan," meaning "wind orchid." Ienari's obsession quickly became a symbol of cultural cachet. Feudal lords seeking to impress the shogun would gift him the plant. As a result, the wild furan became the upscale "fūkiran" meaning "orchid of wealth and nobility." For a



time, samurai were the only people permitted to grow the *Neofinetia falcata* (which spurred the nickname "samurai orchid").

Some plants were as valuable as a house with a garden. But over time with the vicissitudes of economics, politics and the introduction of western ideas on gardening, interest and the value of Fūkiran diminished though they were inherited and maintained by a handful of enthusiasts. Even if the public's opinion changed, Fūkiran never changed. But as the Showa Era began (1926), so began the second boom of Fūkiran collecting. By 1939 the price of Fūkiran was so expensive that an announcement party was held when someone purchased a good Fūkiran, thus again, due to the cost, collecting was limited to the wealthy. The high cost of Fūkiran combined with the expansion of World War II gradually made Fūkiran collecting nearly impossible. Today the popularity of Fūkiran has expanded around the world as many new kinds have been found and prices have come down dramatically because of reproduction from seedlings.

What is Fūkiran?

Fūkiran means in general, a mutated or variegated *Neofinetia falcata* collected from the wild. While there are over 2,200 varieties of *Neof. falcata*, only about 200 are registered on the Meikan¹. To be judged worthy of addition to the Meikan is a grand achievement. A committee from the Society judges submitted plants each year based on their intrinsic characteristics, uniqueness and presentation. Submission involves a large fee and the presentation of three plants of the variety to be judged mounted in suitably beautiful pots lest the judge refuse to look at the plants at all. Mounting a *Neofinetia* is an art unto itself as it involves draping strands of moss around the orchid's root ball to create a smooth, hollow mound that elevates the plant above the pot, showing it off to best effect. In addition, the pot chosen for display must be judged to be suitably matched to the plant to be evaluated. Even *Neofinetia* pots are extraordinary. Traditionally, they are fired-clay pots with three feet and a large drainage hole in the bottom. The finest pots are hand painted with intricate illustrations of landscapes, dragons, fish or birds, and these are individually signed by the artist. A mature Neo mounted in a traditional pot is nothing less than a work of art.

To be designated a new Fūkiran:

1. The same variation must continue consistently for years. Variation includes differences in flower color, size, and shape; leaf size, shape, color, patterning, texture, and the attachment of them to the stem; flowering season; the color of the growing root tips.
2. The number of plants must increase to some extent, and,
3. the physical characteristics should be clearly different from other recognized varieties.

The American orchid hobbyist tends to view their orchids as having aesthetic value only when in bloom. Traditional Japanese aesthetics is centered on the acceptance of transience and imperfection. The aesthetic is sometimes described as one of beauty that is "imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete". It then follows that an object, in this case a *Neofinetia*, may always be an object of beauty. American Orchid Society judging criteria tends to focus on the flowers. Conversely the Japanese consider leaf form, color and number of leaf fans; junction of leaf blade and stem/axis of plant: flower color and shape; and, pot design and moss wrapping. Perhaps now we can appreciate this statement, "Hi, I'm Doug and I'm addicted to Japanese *Vanda falcatas*."

References: American Orchid Society, Botany Boy Plant Encyclopedia, Fukiran Society of America, OrchidBoard, Wikipedia

¹ The Fukiran Meikan is a ranking chart for the varieties of *Neofinetia* registered by the Nihon Fukiran Kai (Japan Fukiran Association).



Plate 27 from Ehon No Yamagusa, Tachibana Yasukuni, 1755