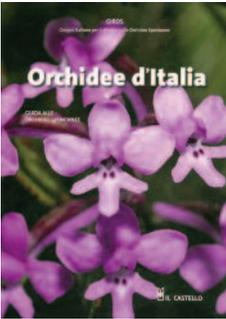


**Book Review: *Orchidee d'Italia – The Orchids of Italy*
Paul Harcourt Davies**



Orchidee d'Italia – The Orchids of Italy by GIROS
Scientific direction by Paulo Grünanger
Authored and illustrated by numerous contributors.
Hardback, 303 pp. ISBN 978-88-8039-891-2
Published by Il Castello (www.ilcastelloeditore.it)
Price € 24 (available directly from GIROS)

“*Orchidee d'Italia*” is a comprehensive work and remarkable in that it is the product of joint efforts by members of GIROS (Gruppa Italiano per La Ricerca sulle Orchidee Sponatee) – literally “The Italian Group for Research on Wild Orchids”. Some 33 authors and 44 photographers (many belonging to both lists) have been involved. The appearance of a book of such a comprehensive nature and generally high quality is a major achievement and a testament to the coordination of the project by Paulo Grünanger. The book measures 24.5 by 17.6 cm and so is not pocketable but it is easily carried in a rucksack. Its pages are profusely illustrated in colour, including small maps that serve to show the distribution by province in Italy. The text is in Italian and there is currently no version available in English or in any other European language. Do not let that put you off: the text is well laid out, consistent and most essential botanical terms are Latinate derivatives of Greek and so differ from English only in endings! It is the only single source where you will find the complete Italian orchid flora illustrated with many of the known hybrids.

The first 48 pages are taken up with more general text concerning orchids. The biological chapters are particularly well conceived, thorough in scope and crafted by internationally acknowledged authorities. There are comprehensive illustrations, including close-ups of flower structures and photomicrographs of mycorrhiza. By far the largest part of the book is the species description section, followed by a chapter on hybridisation. Authorship of each species description has been farmed out to GIROS members who have personal knowledge of that species; they have written to a pattern and each entry has been tightly edited to make sure that information of the same nature appears in the same order in each entry.

GIROS naturally has its “splitters” and “lumpers” but there has not been the proliferation of species in “controversial” genera such as *Ophrys*. In fact, Paulo Grünanger has adopted the more logical scientific approach of utilising subspecies (consistent with the work of Pederson and Faurholdt 2007) and earlier authors such as Buttler (1991) and yours truly (P.H. Davies 1983). There is a proliferation of species within the genus *Epipactis* that would not be convincing to many and also

the retention of “species” such as *Limodorum brulloi* from Calabria that in Italy has been separated from *L. abortivum* and *L. trabutianum* for the past few years on the basis of spur length. Fortunately, items such as *Ophrys murgia* – clearly just *Ophrys sphegodes* subsp. *sipontensis* – have been suppressed. Ultimately, there is no “perfect” system for classifying such capricious plants as orchids, given the inherent problems of imposing a binomial system of classification universally in nature. DNA analysis does not yet (if it ever will) distinguish at the level that would be required. It is always a question of personal interpretation and clearly Paulo Grünanger and his associates have striven hard to be consistent – I am told that, where some members of the “*sphogodes*” group are listed as subspecies and others (such as *Ophrys araneola*) are not, this has to do with an editorial decision over whether names had already been legitimately published or not.

I have thought long and hard about critical comments to make because this is, first and foremost, a remarkable work both in the scope and the concept of a joint project. However, such high contemporary standards have been set by illustrated volumes such as those from C. A. J. Kreutz that our expectations are almost unreasonably high for illustrated European orchid works. The book retails at €24.00 and, like all such books, it is destined to have a limited appeal to a general market. I feel that a few euros more on the cover price could have ensured that extra quality. For example, a slightly heavier paper would have produced both a better “feel” and improved the general quality of colour reproduction.

As someone who has been heavily involved with the writing and production of books for the best part of three decades I know what is achievable and what not. Unfortunately, it is in the supply of illustrations by “too many cooks” that the broth may well be slightly spoiled. The bottom line has to be that in a book such as this, there can be no compromise on picture quality. That is what people see and want and I am afraid that any editor has to be a martinet and go for the very best shots, irrespective of “ruffled feelings”. Some of the whole-plant shots showing the environment are distinctly blurred and some *Ophrys* close-ups very dark. You can do a lot at the preparatory stage to optimise files but there is a limit to the magic that can be woven with inferior material. Substitutes would have been so easy to find, for there are some very able Italian photographers (all GIROS members) working with digital media who could have raised the level of illustration. They produce work of the very highest quality and I have seen a lot of it. I have chatted with several GIROS members who have voiced their disappointment that the handful of photographers who ultimately dominated the supply of pictures did not deliver the quality anticipated. This is nothing to do with sour grapes; it is fact. Several photographers who wrote descriptions found that their contribution was illustrated by someone else's inferior photographs. This aside, it is basically a very good book, well worth its list price, but for just that little more it could have sat up there with the best.