

**Wittrockia 'Leopardinum'** by Peter Tristram in J Brom Soc. 62(5): 204-207. 2012

Much has been said and written about this gorgeous plant for over a hundred years. Little, if anything, has been documented about growing its seed.

I had originally obtained a specimen from a collector in Queensland in the late 1970s (as *Canistrum leopardinum*) but lost the maturing clump to a renegade bulldozer when a new area for a new greenhouse was being cleared. Finally, after many years of searching, about ten years ago a replacement 'leopardinum' was found from my good friends, Garry and Angela Flemming, who live a few hours to the south. It was potted and well fertilised and responded by blooming in 2005/6. Derek Butcher had written a detailed historical and taxonomic article on this plant in 2003 (easily accessed on the Bromeliad Cultivar Register at <http://registry.bsi.org>), including information from the examination of flowering plants in California and New Zealand, with the eventual conclusion that the plant conforms enough with *Wittrockia gigantea* to be listed as *Wittrockia* 'Leopardinum', a cultivar of *W. gigantea*. Nothing was mentioned about the fact that it self-sets seed, however. This fact must have been observed at some time in the century or so since its horticultural debut. 2006 must have also been a good year for *Wittrockia* as I also saw some *W. 'Leopardinum'* blooming to the north, in Queensland in the collection of Mike Symonds. I also found out later about one to the south (mentioned below) and my *W. superba* and 2 forms of *W. cyathiformis* also bloomed.

While photographing the blooming inflorescence, I noticed many ants visiting the flowers. Time passed, until an inspection of the inflorescence revealed many swollen seed capsules - could the ants have been the pollen carriers? Whether these inadvertently transferred pollen or another selfing mechanism was at play, I do not know, though, with so many pods, I suspect the latter. When ripe, the seeds were squeezed out, cleaned with the kitchen egg beater and dried. (Hopefully the mess was cleaned up before my wife found out!) With berry fruits, ripe pods can often be identified by being easily removed - just a gentle wiggle and they pop out. Some also change colour, especially to purple or red. Usually, in cultivation, the progeny will be hybrid, but, when there are many pods, the chances are that the seed will be self-set by one process or another.

Bruce Dunstan, "seed raiser extraordinaire" and I germinated the seed and grew on the seedlings. His grew at many times the speed of mine! The uniformity of the seedlings, his large and mine small, as consistent as cloning, indicates that *Wittrockia* 'Leopardinum' is indeed a species and a very stable one at that. Around the same time, Garry and Angela also bloomed a plant and also grew on much of the self-set seed from it. When compared, the batches of seedlings looked identical.

During a trip to Europe in 2009, I noticed some lovely large specimens of what looked like the same plant in the public display at the Berlin Botanic Garden. These were labelled *Wittrockia gigantea* x *Canistrum lindenii* var. *roseum*. There was also a plant that had bloomed, with the same purplish, flat, somewhat sunken inflorescence, confirming my suspicion that this was also *Wittrockia* 'Leopardinum'. It wasn't close enough to check for swollen seed pods though. According to the records, the plant has been in collections in Europe for well over a century so it is not surprising to find it in a very old botanic garden.

For a long time this plant has remained quite rare and difficult to obtain in Australia, however, with the knowledge that it can easily be grown from self-set seed, it should now become more available. Rumour has it that some Kiwis have also had the same

experience reaching the same conclusions. I am, however, unaware of a seedling plant having yet bloomed, though the largest seedlings should be mature enough to be ready to reproduce. I imagine they will look just like mum and just as beautiful.

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