

# Sobralia decora

By Robert L. Dressler

The Species and Its Cousins in Mexico and Central America



ASOCIACIÓN MEXICANA DE ORQUIDEOLOGÍA

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I HAVE ARGUED THAT SOBREALIAS, in general, are hard to classify, and that their delicate, short-lived flowers do not help us much (Dressler 2009). *Sobralia decora* Bateman was published in 1841 (Bateman 1841). The plant described by John Bateman was from somewhere in Guatemala, but no one knows just where. Ten years later,



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Hooker's *Botanical Magazine* published a drawing (t. 4570) as "*Sobralia sessilis*," stating that it was from British Guiana (where *Sobralia sessilis* certainly grows), but the drawing is

clearly *Sob. decora* in every detail. Since this early confusion, the identity of *Sob. decora* has been muddled as often as not. The name *Sob. decora* has all too often been used for other plants that have little in common with *Sob. decora*. Part of the problem, of course, is that the flowers are so delicate and short-lived in all sobralias. We now have plants or photographs of authentic *Sob. decora* from Belize, Guatemala, northern Honduras and the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, in southern Mexico. All of these plants closely match Bateman's illustration of 1841, and it is now clear that some of the plants that have been called *Sob. decora* are really other and different species.

None of the South American species are very similar to *Sob. decora*, though

- [1] *Sobralia galeottiana*, from western Mexico.
- [2] *Sobralia macdougallii*, from southern Mexico.
- [3] *Sobralia decora*, from northern Guatemala.



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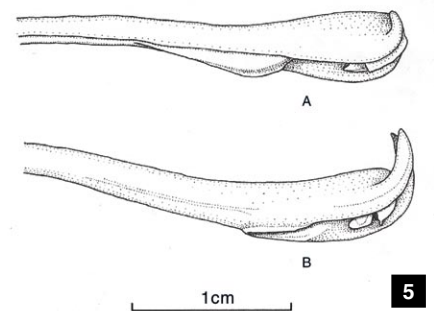
such as *Sob. sessilis*, may be relatives. At least some of these, such as *Sob. decora*, form keikis (plantlets) on the old inflorescences. Here I will concentrate on the species of Mexico and Central America. But, first, I should comment on two Mexican species that have long been misidentified as *Sob. decora*. Fortunately, both of these have been clarified by Eric Hágsater and his colleagues of the Asociación Mexicana de Orquideología.

*Sobralia galeottiana* is found in western Mexico from Sinaloa to Oaxaca. The old inflorescences of *Sob. galeottiana* normally produce keikis, and the leaves and sheaths are pubescent. The flowers are magenta with some white areas on the lip. In 1961, Mike Wirth and I found this species in Nayarit being pollinated by male bees of the genus *Euglossa*. Whenever we heard a bee buzz, we could usually quickly find a *Sobralia* with its pollinator. When we returned to St. Louis, a visitor kindly offered to identify the bees. Alas, we never saw the generous visitor or the bee specimens again. By now, I think that I could identify the bees, if I had them.

*Sobralia macdougallii* is a distinct

species of southern Mexico (Chiapas and adjacent Oaxaca; also possibly in Guatemala). The plants do not produce keikis (one might argue, then, that it is not really a close relative of *Sob. decora*). The flowers are magenta with golden orange in the throat, and the petals are spatulate and distinctly arching.

In the true *Sob. decora*, the plant and the leaves are usually smaller than in the several species that have been confused with *Sob. decora*, and the flowers are distinctly smaller (but often more numerous). The old inflorescences consistently form keikis (or, in Spanish, “hijos”). The flowers are relatively small, and the sepals and petals are white or pale pink, but may become darker pink with age (that is, in the afternoon). The midlobe of the lip is pink and distinctly crisped, with a white spot at the apex that usually narrows toward the base. Except for this, the throat is pale reddish brown within. The column is white and the lateral column wings project only slightly, if at all, above the top of the column apex. Beneath the column there are two raised keels in front of the middle of the column.



[4] *Sobralia decora*, from northern Honduras.

[5] Columns of *Sob. decora* (A) and *Sob. fenziiana* (B). The column of *Sob. fenziiana* has the column “wings” much longer than in *Sob. decora*, whereas the ventral ridges are more prominent in *Sob. decora* than in *Sob. fenziiana*. The *Sob. decora* was from Copan, Honduras (Karremans, no. 1886), and the *Sob. fenziiana* from Aguirre, San Cristóbal de Savegre, Costa Rica (Pupulin et. al, no. 1405); both cultivated at the Jardín Botánico Lankester.





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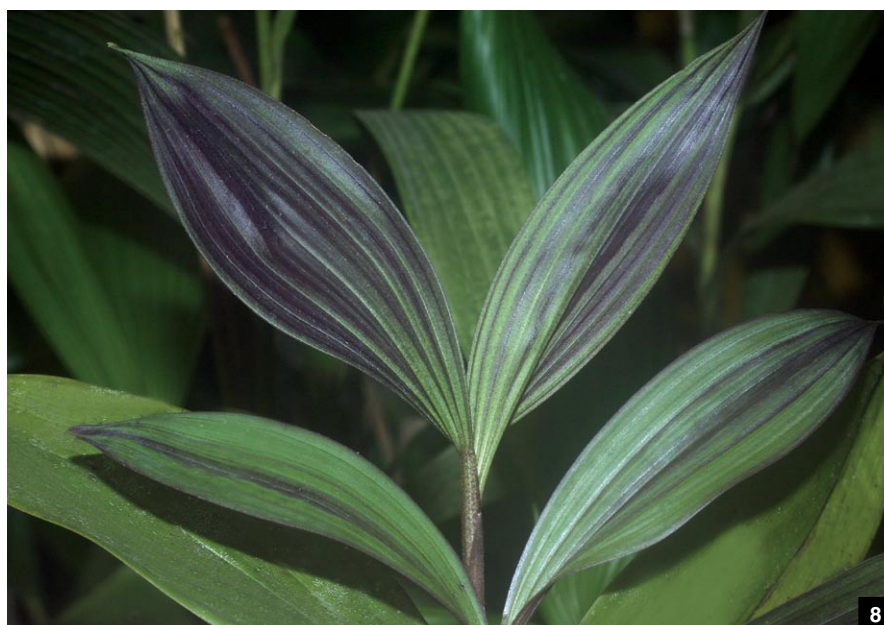


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In Central America, the major element that is too often confused with *Sob. decora* is *Sobralia fenzliana*, which, like *Sob. decora*, regularly produces keikis. H. Reichenbach described this species from western Panama in 1852, and it is common in Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. I would expect to find *Sob. fenzliana* in Honduras, at least in the south, near Nicaragua. According to Garay (1978), the species ranges south to Ecuador. Both the plants and the flowers of *Sob. fenzliana* are larger than in *Sob. decora*, and the plants often reach 6½ feet (2 m) in height and regularly produce keikis. The plants are normally much taller than those of *Sob. decora*, and they tend to grow straight up, rather than being short and bushy. The rose-pink flowers also have a white spot at the tip of the lip. The lateral column wings of *Sob. fenzliana* stand up like rabbit ears, as compared to the short nubbins of *Sob. decora*.

Now I must apologize for having misidentified ‘KG’s Fleeting Moment’ as *Sob. decora*. It is clearly *Sob. fenzliana*. I hope that I now know both *Sob. decora* and *Sob. fenzliana* better than I did when I made that blunder. ‘KG’s Fleeting Moment’ is said to be from Chichicastenango, Guatemala, but whether the plant had first been brought to Chichicastenango from somewhere farther south, I do not know.

I have not seen *Sob. sessilis* of eastern South America, but it appears to be similar to *Sob. fenzliana* (Dunsterville 1980). *Sobralia yauaperyensis* was described from Brazil and is reported from Venezuela. We have a plant labeled as *Sob. yauaperyensis*, and this plant has darker purple under the leaves than our *Sob. fenzliana*, and the white spot at the tip of the lip is tiny. In other features, our “*Sob. yauaperyensis*,” which has just flowered, looks very much like *Sob. fenzliana*. Until we can study a guaranteed *Sob. yauaperyensis* of known



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geographic origin, one must be a bit skeptical about the status of “*Sob. yauaperyensis*.”

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[6] *Sobralia fenzliana* ‘KG’s Fleeting Moment’, with a flower. Note that the older stem (to the left) has a keiki with roots growing.

[7] *Sobralia fenzliana*, from Colombia.

[8] *Sobralia fenzliana*, uppermost leaves of two small plants from Costa Rica, showing the purple tinge on both surfaces of the leaves.

respective areas. I am also indebted to the late E.W. Greenwood for excellent drawings and photographs of *Sob. decora*. I must thank Christina Smith and Franco Pupulin, both of whom contributed to the drawings of the columns of *Sob. decora* and *Sob. fenzliana* (Fig. 5).

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