

RHYNCHOSTYLIS RETUSA BL., THE FOX-TAIL ORCHID.

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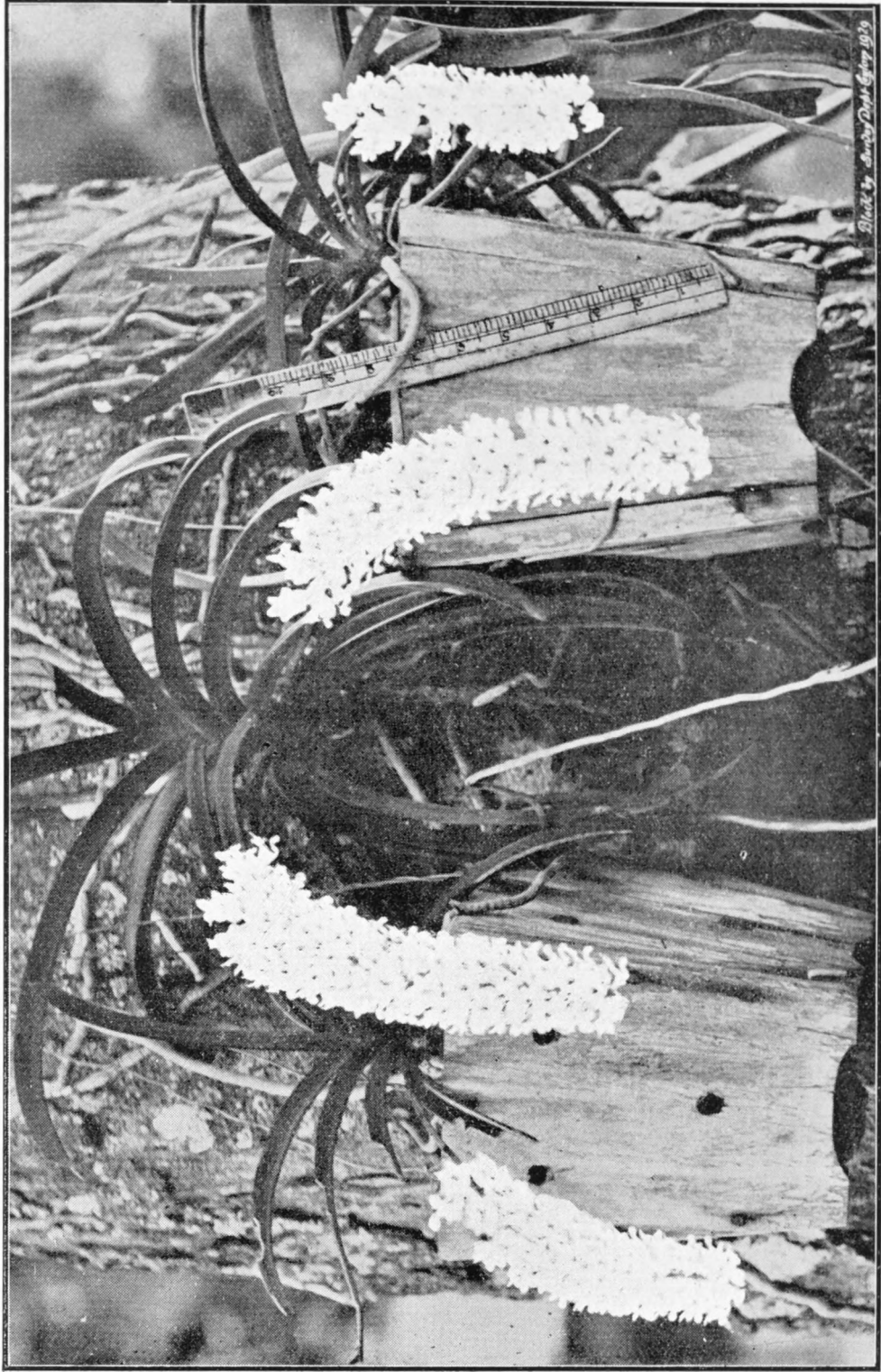
THE fox-tail orchid is one of the most beautiful of our indigenous orchids and is a favourite of both amateur and professional gardeners owing to its handsome inflorescence and the ease with which it can be grown.

The plant is of a hardy nature. It has a thick short stem of about 5 to 6 inches long covered with old brown leaf sheaths. The leaves are thick and fleshy and are about 10 to 16 inches long and about 1 to 1½ inches broad. They are arranged obliquely in a spreading and recurved manner.

The flower raceme is ordinarily from 10 to 16 inches long. It is densely clothed with spotted flowers of a delicate waxy-white purple with a tip strongly tinged with violet pink. The pedicels are short and stout. The tail-like, almost cylindrical form of the raceme gives the orchid its common name.

Culture.—The plant is easily propagated by the division of stem suckers, carefully severed from the parent plant with a couple of roots attached to each. Its long, thick and vermiform branching roots enable the plant to thrive best on live tree trunks which have fairly thick and splitting corky bark, for example, jak and mango. Palms are less suitable. After removal of dead roots and dried parts of the lower stem, the plant should be carefully placed on the trunk of a live tree. The root system immediately around the plant should be covered with a little moss and coconut fibre and the whole should be secured firmly with coir string. In tying the plant care should be taken to see that it is kept in its natural growing position and that the roots are not cut or injured by the string.

Low-hanging and injured roots may be cut back to about a foot from the plant. Only copper wire may be used to secure the plant to the tree trunk as other kinds of wire affect the growth of the roots. The plant prefers a warm, moist atmosphere and thrives best on an eastern aspect. After being tied to a tree, the plant needs regular syringing with water for at least four to six weeks to encourage it to give out new roots.



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In the green house or conservatory the plant may be grown in perforated pots or baskets, preferably those made of wood. Plants that have lost their lower leaves should have their stems cut off at a point immediately below some young active roots in order to bring the position of the leaves to the surface of the pot. Only a few healthy young roots should be left. All others should be cut back to a point which allows insertion into the pot without overcrowding. Plants with short or few roots may be supported by a stick placed in the bottom of the pot. After the roots have been placed in position, half the receptacle should be filled with pieces of decayed wood or bark, chopped coconut husk, charcoal and bits of bricks, and the other half with a compost of roots of *Asplenium nidus* (bird's nest) finely chopped and mixed with crushed crocks or charcoal to keep the compost porous. During the first week, the compost should be kept moist; afterwards morning and afternoon syringing will be sufficient until the plant starts growing, when copious supplies may be given. Plants grown in this manner produce blooms annually about June-July which last for over four weeks. When the plant is well established, the only attention or care that is necessary is a little watering during times of drought if the plants are in an open shed or house.

The accompanying photograph shows the plant growing in pots and on a tree trunk at the Heneratgoda Botanic Gardens. The plants in pots are about eighteen months and those on the tree trunk about three and a half years old.