

A NEW LEASE OF LIFE FOR RARE ORCHIDS

As farmers across Victoria celebrate the boost that this season's rain will provide to crops and pastures, the Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria and partners are celebrating growth of a different kind.

The rain has fallen at a perfect time for this year's plantings of the nationally threatened Candy Spider-orchid (*Caladenia versicolor*), Tawny Spider-orchid (*Caladenia fulva*), Melblom's Spider-orchid (*Caladenia hastata*) and Coloured Spider-orchid (*Caladenia colorata*) by the Orchid Conservation Program. These four orchid species are classified as federally threatened and re-introduction to the wild is critical for the survival.

The Orchid Conservation Program is now growing 30 different endangered orchid species at its lab at Cranbourne Gardens for re-introduction projects in Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales. Orchids are complex to grow and re-introductions require an understanding of their mycorrhizal associations, pollinators and habitat requirements.

Last year, six threatened orchid species were planted across the Wimmera; which survived dry conditions last spring thanks to hand watering with great outcomes.

Orchid Conservation Botanist at the Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria, Dr Noushka Reiter and volunteers from the Australasian Native Orchid Society are now preparing to plant around 700 rare orchids throughout late-June and July.

Dr Reiter said volunteers are thrilled to plant these species back in to the wild.

"There are a lot of people watching closely to see if last year's plantings worked and we're thrilled to say they have," she said. "The Candy Spider-orchid re-introductions last year flowered and had significant seed set across the site. We are hopeful that this year's rains will see our first baby orchids emerge of this species at the re-introduction sites."

"This year's re-introductions will really strengthen these species overall. We aim to re-introduce into three sites eventually for each species in large enough numbers for these populations to be self-sustaining."

The Orchid Conservation Program team partners with the Australian Network for Plant Conservation, Australasian Native Orchid Society, Department of Environment Land Water and Planning, Wimmera Catchment Management Authority, Trust for Nature, Parks Victoria, Alcoa/ Portland Aluminium and many enthusiastic volunteers to achieve these reintroductions.

Funding for this year's re-introductions was provided by the Victorian Government Threatened Species Protection Initiative and Portland Aluminium /Alcoa.