Brassia

Brassia is a genus of epiphytic orchids. The genus was named for William Brass, a British botanist and illustrator. The abbreviation is Brs. The type species is *Brassia aurantiaca*.

The geographic range of Brassia is Mexico, Central America, the West Indies, northern South America and one species in Florida. The center of diversity is in the Peruvian Andes. Brassia grows in warm, wet forests at sea level to cool cloud forests just under 5000 feet in elevation. Most species are restricted to limited geographic range except for *B. caudata* which is broadly distributed.

The long spreading sepals and petals in Brassia and its hybrids account for the common name of “spider orchids”. Other identification characteristics include large elliptic-oblong pseudobulbs with 1 or 2 leaves, lateral unbranched, multifloral inflorescences with small floral bracts. The inflorescence emerges from two ranked, foliaceous bracts at the base of the pseudobulb. The lip is not attached to the column and the pollinarum structure has a narrow stipe.

Brassia uses entomorphily in its pollination. The structure of the flower mimics spiders hunted by wasps in the genera [*Pepsis*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pepsis) and [*Campsomeris*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Campsomeris). The female wasp stings the lip of the flower while trying to grasp its prey and in the process, the pollinarum sticks to the wasp’s head.

The many desirable characteristics of Brassia make it an attractive candidate for hybridization and intergeneric crosses. The most significant trait passed in to progeny is flower size. The long, slender sepals and petals can produce flowers over 40cm from the tips of the dorsal to lateral sepals. Vigor and inflorescence initiation in Brassia progeny reverses the reluctance to bloom in some Brassia species. Brassia contributes to better spacing of flowers, improving bunched up flowers in some and overly long inflorescences in others. Brassias can readily cross with many genera in the Oncidium Alliance producing a bewildering array of crosses. Finally, the heat tolerance of Brassia, especially when crossed with Odontoglossum makes hybrids growable in a wider range of environments.

Brassia does have several negative traits that hybridizers have to take into account. Dilution genes in Brassia sometimes weaken the color in intergeneric hybrids. This is a particular problem with *Brassia verrucosa*. Pollen sterility in many first generation hybrids of Brassia limits the creation of many crosses. In general, Brassia crosses result in reduced fertility of the progeny. While the large flower size in Brassia is a plus, the open, star shape of the flower is considered a negative by many. Finally, Brassia genes often produce a twisted lip in many offspring.

The key Building Block Species of Brassia are *Brassia arcuigera, Brassia verrucosa and Brassdia gireoudiana.* These three species account for 73% of the approximately 213 Brassia crosses. Three other species, *Brassia brachiata, Brassia caudate and Brassia maculata* have played a lesser but still significant role in hybridization. They account for most of the remaining crosses.