

# New Ways to Grow Streps

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There is a certain undeniable elegance to streps that draws people to them with a single glance. Somehow they manage to be graceful and exotic at the same time.

At the 2013 Gesneriad Convention held in Toronto, there was one particular display that captivated me with two floating masses of blooming streps that seemed magically suspended in mid air. These were in fact the handiwork of

Bob and Dee Stewart who had come all the way from Massachusetts to not only enter the show, but to also present some of their knowledge and skills on growing beautiful streps. I was not at all surprised to learn that in 1994, at the previous Gesneriad Society Convention hosted in Toronto, their single-leaf strep *cooperii* had won Best in Show.

Bob and Dee began growing gesneriads in 1971 with a two foot, two-shelf light stand and chuckled as they noted that, over the years, their hobby had just kept getting bigger until it has finally reached the status of an “out of control hobby”. Now they have a 24 ft. x 30 ft. greenhouse in which they grow 500 species of gesneriads and about as many orchids and some begonias

I was eager to learn why the streps could grow on the suspended plaques and their interesting presentation on species streps helped explain the evolutionary roots that made it possible.

There are three main gesneriads that originate from Africa: our beloved African violet, streptocarpus and streptocarpella. There are over 130 strep species and they are interesting to hobby growers since they are attractive and easy to grow. Botanists also find them fascinating since they have a lot of weird growth habits. The first Species strep was discovered in 1826 and named *Streptocarpus rexii*.

Streps have evolved into specialized forest dwellers and like moderate to cool temperatures and medium light with some shading in the summer. Many of the streptocarpus species found in Africa grow as acaulescent (stem-less), unifoliate (single-leaf) plants on vertical surfaces such as stream banks, tree trunks, cliffs and ravines. They seem to prefer rough textured rocks like granite and sandstone which surprisingly tend to be acidic and goes against the common practice of adding lime to the growth medium of streps.



Upon hearing of the unifoliate streps, I became very interested. Two years earlier, I had visited Rimba Ilmu botanical gardens in Malaysia and had seen another Gesneriad: *Monophyllaea*, that grew with a single leaf. A friend had even shown me a strep seedling that she was growing that just seemed to want to produce a single leaf. I wondered: stem-less and unifoliate, growing on a vertical surface... how would that work?

As it turns out, it actually makes a lot of sense! If a plant wants to expose its leaves to the sun on the ground, it needs a stem to push its leaves above all the other plants but if it's growing on a vertical surface, it doesn't need a stem and can just drape a single leaf down a vertical surface. This saves the plant the energy of growing a stem.

Understanding this vertical growth habit of streps, gave Bob the idea of trying to grow them mounted on a plaque like his orchids. To his surprise, they flourished.

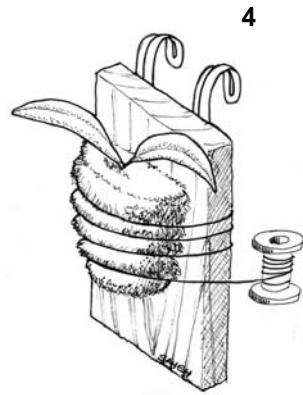
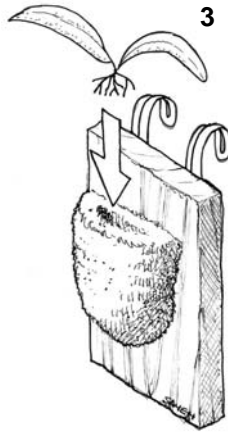
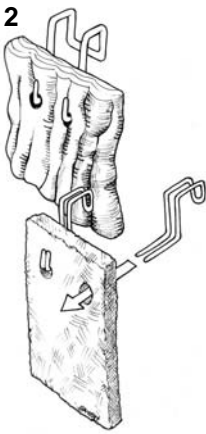
Following are instructions to make your own plaque mounted strep. You will need a plaque, a hook, long fibre sphagnum moss, fishing line as well as a strep seedling.

1. Choose your plaque: It can be cork, slabs of compressed tree fern or just a piece of wood. Please note that cork bark is susceptible to bug infestation so tree fern fiber is better. The size of the plaque is something you will have to decide from trial and error. Some plants like to have a backing as large as the plant so they grow against it otherwise their leaves begin to curl under. You can begin with a standard plaque size: 5-1/2" W x 11" L and 1/2" thick.
2. Attach a hook to the back. You can drill a hole through it and use a bit of wire to bend it into shape or purchase ready-made ones and fasten them to the back.
3. Take a handful of long fiber sphagnum moss. Stuff the seedling plant down the centre.



*Streptocarpus* 'falling stars' is mounted on a display structure.





4. Tie it on with monofilament (fishing line).

Strep-mounted plaques need to be watered more frequently than potted streps since they dry out .

You can also grow streps in suet baskets that have been stuffed with long fiber sphagnum. One other option to try is a strawberry jar, just make sure you use a light soil mix.

Most streps live in tropical or temperate regions. In summer, it rains a couple of times a week. In winter, which is the dry season, it gets cooler and the temperature may even drop below freezing. Dee gave me two major tips to growing streps:

1. Don't let them get too hot in the summer. They really don't like that.
2. Keep them dry in the winter. Dee literally lets them start to wilt before she waters them during winter. She also puts them in clay pots since that keeps them dryer in the winter.

I have to end this article by thanking Bob and Dee for all the information and tips they generously shared. I am eager to try these new ways of growing streps and seeing what can be achieved with these amazing plants.

**Below:** Two pictures of streps grown in suet baskets.  
photo: Bob Stewart

