



# CHIRITA: An Introduction

Chirita is a large Old World genus distributed throughout much of Asia. It ranges from Sri Lanka and India eastward through Nepal into China and Southeast Asia down the Malay Peninsula and onto the southern islands of Sumatra, Java and Borneo. Originally based on a small collection of Himalayan herbs, Chirita was first described in 1822.

The genus is comprised of shrubby or soft-stemmed herbs which are either perennial or annual in nature. They are terrestrial or rupicolous and can be found growing in filtered light often on limestone cliffs or rocky hillsides.

Chiritas have beautiful flowers ranging from shades of purple to white and yellow. This, along with their ease of culture and the recent introduction of new species and hybrids has led to their ever increasing popularity.

## CLASSIFICATION



Family: GESNERIACEAE  
 Subfamily: CYRTANDROIDEAE  
 Tribe: DIDYMOCARPEAE  
 Genus: CHIRITA  
 Sub-genera: None, however, the genus is taxonomically divided into three sections: Chirita, Gibbosaccus, and Microchirita. Divisions are based on growth habits and other morphological (structural) characteristics. (A very general discussion of the three sections follows below.)

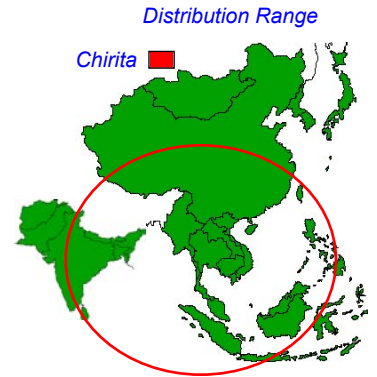
No. of Species: 140+.  
 Type Species: The genus was initially described in 1822 by David Don, however, it wasn't until 1954 that B.L. Burt actually described the type species *Chirita urticifolia*.  
 Distribution Range: Indian subcontinent and southeastern Asia.  
 Name Derivation: Selected by David Don, the name is derived from the vernacular name of one of the species.  
 Root Structure: Fibrous.  
 Growth Habit: Caulescent (with a stem) and acaulescent (without a stem).  
 Chromosome Count: Depending upon the taxonomic subdivision: 4, 9, 10, 14, 16, 17, and 18.

## CULTURAL REQUIREMENTS

Temperature: Cool to moderately warm growing - 55 to 80 degrees F or 12 to 25 degrees C.  
 Watering: Bottom or top, with the potting mixture generally allowed to dry out between waterings.  
 Light: Low to medium light.  
 Humidity: 40 to 50 percent.



*C. 'Aiko'*



*C. eburnea*



*C. sinensis 'Hisako'*



*C. sclerophylla*

## CULTURAL REQUIREMENTS Cont'd

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*C. 'Keiko'*

- Fertilizer: Continually with a non-urea based formulation, e.g., Dyna Gro 7-9-5.
- Soil: Neutral, heading upward to slightly alkaline; pH=6-7; Basic Potting Mixture (BPM) with the addition of dolomitic lime is appropriate.
- Propagation: Asexually using leaves, crowns and suckers or sexually (seed) through self or cross pollination. Hybrid plant material will only reproduce true using asexual propagation methods and techniques.



*C. lutea*

## TAXONOMIC DIVISIONS

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As discussed previously, the genus *Chirita* is taxonomically divided into three groups: *microchirita*, *gibbosaccus* and *chirita*. These divisions are based on differences in growth habit and morphological characters.

### SECTION: MICROCHIRITA

This section contains approximately 20 species which are either soft-stemmed caulescent annuals or short-lived perennials. The best known species within this group are *C. lavandulacea* and *C. micromusa*. The name, *microchirita*, refers to the group's flowers having small calyx lobes. *Microchirita* are primarily tropical, being predominantly located in southeast Asia and the Malay Peninsula. The chromosome counts for this section are 9, 17, and 18.

### SECTION: GIBBOSACCUS

This section contains approximately 80 species, all of which form acaulescent rosettes. Many of the species contained in this section are cold-tolerant, e.g., *C. fimbrisepala* and *C. subrhomboidea*. The best known species within this group are *C. sinensis*, *C. lutea*, and *C. linearifolia*. The name, *gibbosaccus*, means "swollen pouch" and refers specifically to the flower structure of *C. sinensis* (i.e., its corolla base shape). *Gibbosaccus* have a chromosome count of 18 and are restricted to locales in southern China and northern Vietnam. This section can be informally broken down into four sub-groups of related species: *C. sinensis* group, *C. pteropoda* group, *C. linearifolia* group, and a "miscellaneous group" of four species (*C. fimbrisepala*, *C. sclerophylla*, *C. subrhomboidea*, and *C. tribracteata*).

### SECTION: CHIRITA

This section contains about 45 species. Although the majority of species within this section are caulescent perennial shrubs, some species are small annuals producing only one or two leaves in a growing season. *Chirita* species *asperifolia*, *briggsioides*, *walkerae*, and *moonii* are the best known of this group. Members of the *Chirita* section have chromosome numbers of 4, 9, 10, 14, 16 and 17. With species indigenous to Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and southern China, this group has the widest geographic range of the three sections.

## RECOMMENDED READING

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An excellent article called "The Cultivated Species of *Chirita*" by Dr. J. Boggan (Smithsonian Institute), published in *The Gloxinian*, 2nd Quarter 1998 (Vol. 48, No. 2).

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*C. sinensis*



*C. heterotricha*



*C. fimbrisepala*