



Orchid Care

TIPS FOR HELPING YOUR ORCHID GROW AND BLOOM THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

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Orchids, orchids everywhere. They used to be grown only by the privileged class who had conservatories—and gardeners—on their estates. But with at least 28,000 species and well over 300,000 registered cultivars, Orchidaceae comprises the largest family of flowering plants in the world, and more varieties are being developed all the time. Today, you can pick one up at the corner grocery or your home improvement store for less than \$10 any day of the week.

They look great on the coffee table placed in a fabulous urn or on the kitchen windowsill. With any luck, the right light, and just a little bit of care, your initial blooms will last weeks, and possibly months.

Although orchids are one of the most adaptable plant groups on earth, it's very important to consider two major conditions for healthy, long-blooming plants: light and temperature. Humidity, water, and fertilizer are easily managed as long as you follow light and temperature rules for particular orchids.

Here are four orchids that are bred for a typical home environment: Most homes are around 70 degrees in the daytime and between 50 and 60 degrees at night. The warmer-growing *Phalaenopsis* (*fayl-eh-NOP-siss*) 'Moth Orchid' has lavish sprays of colorful flowers and will tolerate a very low light condition—as little as 10-15 percent of normal outdoor light. The compact *Paphiopedilum* (*paff-ee-oh-PED-ih-lum*) 'Lady Slipper' is a cooler-growing plant with a single flower, which can last for months. It thrives in an east- or south-shaded window. The delicate *Oncidium* (*on-SID-ee-um*) 'Dancing Ladies' blooms in the spring, has long sprays of tiny yellow and brown spotted flowers that resemble groups of ballet dancers fluttering in the breeze, and requires twice as much light as the *Phalaenopsis*. The large cool-growing grassy *Cymbidium* (*sim-BID-ee-um*), with its long-lasting waxy flowers on thick spikes, is easy to grow—but only if you have the room and lots of indirect bright light. Orchids are very easy to bring back to bloom, and what helps that process most is the



correct light. Most orchids like at least four to five hours of good natural daylight, preferably in windows not facing west.

Don't overwater your orchid. A good rule of thumb is to let your plant dry out slightly between waterings so air can circulate among its roots. Orchids potted in clay pots require more frequent watering than those potted in plastic, which holds moisture longer. Although orchids like plenty of humidity, most varieties don't like wet feet. Stick your finger in the pot—if it feels a bit dry, it's time to water thoroughly.

Fertilize your orchid throughout the year. Here's how: Orchids are generally grown in bark, which drains very quickly. If you consider how your orchid would naturally grow in the wild—clinging to a tree in a forest, using decomposed bark as a nutrient, and flushed with rain every few days, you start to get the picture about how to fertilize.

Your orchid won't know how to use one full dose of fertilizer a month. Instead, dilute a full feeding to quarter strength, and each time you water, give your plant a little bit. You probably will water two to three times a month in the winter and once to twice a week in the warmer months. Use plain water once a month to flush the orchid and prevent any salt build-up in the pot.

Find a fertilizer that has a high first number, such as 30-10-10, which indicates high nitrogen, and use that throughout the year. When you want to encourage blooms, switch to a high bloom fertilizer like 15-30-15, which has twice the phosphorus as nitrogen. Don't change your watering habit, just the ratio of nutrients. Once you see the flower spikes appear, go back to

your regular fertilizer. When the bloom spike is finished, clip it back to the node just above the base of the plant. Use a sharp clipper and make certain that it is sterilized with soapy water to avoid spreading any virus to your orchid.

Orchids benefit from an annual repotting. Repot your orchids in the spring, but never in the warmer summer months. Increase the pot size just slightly, because they like to be cramped. If the change is too dramatic, your plant will have a hard time setting down roots and may rot.

Carefully remove the orchid from its pot, taking away all the old bark that may be clinging to its roots. Run a bit of water on the old roots to loosen them up. With a sterile, sharp clipper, judiciously clip away any dried or stringy roots, leaving plump roots untouched. Also examine the leaves, and if there are any original leaves that look unhealthy, remove those as well.

Pot your orchid into a damp mix that is two-thirds medium bark with small amounts of peat and pumice mixed in to help aerate the bark. Place a little bit of the mix into the pot. Set the plant inside the pot and, being careful not to force or break the roots, gently tuck them into the medium, filling around the sides and covering them up with more planting mix. Tamp the bark around the edges with a chopstick to secure the roots in the medium. Refrain from watering for several days so the plant will be forced to send its roots down into its new home. Then, give it a thorough watering, and resume your regular watering schedule.

It's as easy as that to grow beautiful orchids year-round, bringing dramatic color and long-lasting flowers into your interiors even in the coldest, dreariest months of the year. ■