

Orchids: cultivation and care

GWF376

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Orchids bring a taste of paradise to the home - as long as you know how to look after them. They are often given as presents that then die. Here's how to make sure they don't.

Orchids are one of the largest and most diverse of the flowering plant families. Thought to have well over 20,000 species and with thousands more hybrids bred every year they are fast becoming one of the most popular house plants available. Orchids grow on every continent apart from Antarctica and have adapted to every habitat you can imagine, from terrestrial forms like all those that are native to the UK and grow in the soil, to lithophytes that grow naturally on rocks. Most however come from the tropics and are epiphytes, living harmlessly on trees. They have specialised aerial roots to absorb water and nutrients from the air, mist and rain.

In this factsheet we look at those most commonly sold as house plants and how to care for them.

***Phalaenopsis* - Moth orchid**

☼ One of the easiest orchids to grow, making reliable houseplants. They flower up to three times a year, each flower lasting several weeks.

Best place

Choose a semi-shaded spot away from direct sunlight; a west or east-facing window is ideal. They like temperatures of 15°C minimum by night, a maximum of 30°C by day and do well in centrally heated homes. Fluctuation between day and night time temperatures is vital to encourage flowering. Humidity is also important, so stand plants on a tray of wet pebbles - but not in water. On warm, mornings you can

mist them - no later though, as the foliage must be dry by evening.

Watering and feeding

Keep slightly moist at all times but never wet. Water once a week during summer if needed but less in winter. Always do this from the top of the pot, and use tepid rainwater or filtered tap water. Don't use cold water as it can shock a plant (see *Orchid problems*) and don't water the crown as this can cause it to rot. Feed your plant once a month using a balanced liquid plant feed at a quarter of its usual strength.

Useful tips

Flower spikes often branch and produce further blooms. Cut the spike off just below where the first flower appeared, just as the last one is beginning to fade. Then cut the entire spike off at the base when it has withered.

Cymbidium

- ☼ More demanding. Must be placed outside in the summer.
- ☼ They flower from autumn to spring, and produce large flower spikes that can last up to eight weeks each.

Best place

Cymbidiums need lots of light and low temperatures. Only keep them indoors during autumn and winter. When inside, stand in a bright spot, such as a cool

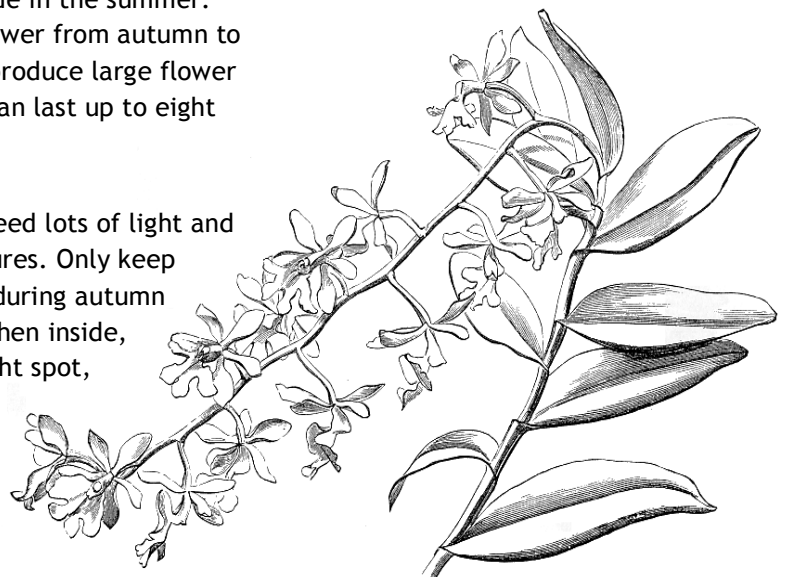
conservatory or windowsill, away from direct sunlight. Keep at about 10-15°C until the flower spike is well developed. You can then move it to a warmer spot, around 20°C. If it's too warm the resulting flowers soon fade. When the risk of frost has passed, harden off, and give it a warm position outside in dappled or partial shade.

Watering and feeding

Water your cymbidium once a week all year if needed, using rainwater or filtered tap water. From autumn to spring feed fortnightly, and every week during spring and summer, using a balanced liquid feed at quarter to half strength. To encourage flowering, switch to a tomato fertiliser every week in August and September at quarter to half strength.

Useful tip

Cymbidium flower spikes are heavy and need support. Insert a small cane as soon as the spike forms to



keep it upright. Position the canes in the middle of the pot to avoid damaging new roots.

Dendrobium - Bamboo orchid

☼ Two types are commonly sold, an easy one and another that's more challenging, but they are seldom labelled!

☼ The easier ones flower throughout the year and enjoy warmer temperatures. Flowers are carried on long spikes from the top of their fleshy stems. To grow these, follow our guide to *Phalaenopsis*.

☼ The trickier sort flower on side-shoots projecting from the sides of the plant's leafy stems. Here's how to look after them.

Best place

Place in a very light position, away from direct sunlight to ensure flowering. During the spring and summer keep at a minimum of 18°C by day and 15°C by night. In autumn and winter it'll need a cooler spot, 14°C during the day, 10°C by night. Keep it humid and well-ventilated at all times.

Watering and feeding

From March to June, water sparingly until they start to show signs of new growth. Then water weekly and feed fortnightly, using a high-nitrogen fertiliser at half strength until September, then switch to a tomato fertiliser at half strength. From November until February the plant will become dormant. Don't water or feed until it starts to flower.

Useful tip

Like *Phalaenopsis* and some *Cymbidium*, *Dendrobium* are epiphytes and rely on aerial roots. In the wild, roots are exposed to the light not buried in compost. Conventional pots block light so it's best to use clear plastic ones.

Repotting orchids

All orchids need repotting from time to time, but don't do it too often. Every three to five years

should be sufficient. It's a simple task but you must use proper orchid compost. You can buy this from garden centres and DIY stores, and also by mail order.

Moth and bamboo orchids

These orchids don't out-grow their container they just need the compost refreshed every two or three years. Do this in the spring.

☼ Tip the plant from its pot, tease out all the old compost and roots, then cut off any damaged or decayed roots.

☼ Repot in the original container (no larger than 12-15cm across, *Dendrobium* can be given a slightly larger pot if needed), gently packing fresh compost around its roots.

☼ To help re-establishment, water sparingly for six weeks, until it feels firmly rooted.

Cymbidium

These need repotting only when they're root-bound. This is best done from February to May into a pot just larger than the original.

☼ Cut off any dead roots and remove as much of the old compost as you can without disturbing the root ball too much.

☼ This type of orchid has pseudobulbs, swollen tubers at base of the plant that stores nutrients. Only the young ones flower. When repotting, ensure you give the youngest, greenest bulbs most space.

☼ Older, congested plants can be split during March or April.

☼ Tip the plant from its pot, shake off compost and look for natural divisions.

☼ Divide into two or three new plants with four or five pseudobulbs each. Remove any dead or damaged growth.

☼ Pot new plants into small pots, don't water them, but mist them daily for a fortnight to help them establish. Then water sparingly for a further six weeks until firmly rooted.

Orchid problems

Bud and flower drop

The most likely cause is shock caused by a sudden change in temperature, light levels or watering regime. Keep away from draughts and radiators, avoid moving them and water regularly.

Pests & diseases

Aphids, scale insects and mealy bugs attack orchids but can be controlled using an insecticide based on fatty acids. Red spider mite can also be a nuisance but can be treated using bifenthrin-based sprays. Soft rot in the crown and the roots are fungal problems caused by overwatering and poor ventilation. Orchids are also susceptible to viruses, which sap their vigour and lead to mottled, discoloured foliage and flowers. Infected plants can't be treated and should be discarded.

Fatal flaws

Orchids are sensitive plants and can be damaged through poor treatment or serious neglect. They are slow to react, and take up to five weeks from the incident to start dying back or showing serious symptoms. If you give a newly bought orchid basic care and it dies within the first five weeks, it's likely to have been badly treated before you got it. We recommend you keep your receipt and take the plant back to where you bought it, and ask for a refund.

Mail order suppliers

Burnham Nurseries Ltd,

Forches Cross, Newton Abbot,
Devon TQ12 6PZ 01626 352233
www.orchids.uk.com

Laurence Hobbs Orchids Ltd,

Bailiffs Cottage Nursery,
Hophurst Lane, Crawley Down,
West Sussex RH10 4LN
01342 715142

McBean's Orchids

Cooksbridge, East Sussex,
BN8 4PR 01273 400228
www.mcbeansorchids.co.uk