

# ORCHIDS

-10% of all flowering plants on Earth are part of this family

-They grow everywhere from arctic tundra to dry savannahs to tropical rainforests: from coastal plains to altitudes of 14,000 feet.

## ORCHIDS ARE NOT PARASITES

Orchids growing wild in the tropics are attached to the limbs and trunks of trees resulting in the conclusion they are parasites. This is not so. They are using the trees as places to grow. Orchids are often found in the crotches of limbs where water and nutrients from roosting birds naturally accumulate and the roots absorb these nutrients.

## HISTORY

Orchids are mentioned in Oriental records from about 800 BC and many drawings of orchids have been found on many ancient scrolls from all over the world, especially China, Japan and India.

In Europe, they became popular in the early 1800s but only the very rich could afford them, as it was deemed necessary to build a greenhouse. Paid collectors were sent all over the world to find them in remote mountain ranges and rain forests. No one knew how to care for the orchids and many died in transit, or from too much heat and watering by their new owners. These plants were considered so erotic and sensual that women were forbidden to own them in England until Queen Victoria ordered an orchid house to be built at the palace and the law was changed. Orchid mania ended at the start of World War 1.

## HOW TO CHOOSE AN ORCHID

- **The wiggle factor.** Gently grab the plant near the pot. If the roots haven't firmly affixed themselves to the pot, you can gently lift the orchid from its pot and carefully inspect them. If it's firmly affixed to the pot, don't tear it out. You don't want to damage the roots.
- **Healthy roots.** The roots are the most important part of the orchid plant. Orchid roots are highly specialized organs that rapidly collect water and even

perform photosynthesis. A healthy orchid's roots will be light green when dry and dark green when wet. There should be a long, pointed and shiny green growing tip. The longer the growing tip, the healthier the plant. Dead orchid roots are shriveled and tan when wet and white when dry. A plant with dead roots will not survive.

- **Look at the leaves.** This is a difficult topic to address because there is so much variation among orchids. Some have thin, pencil-like leaves, while others have fleshy, flat leaves. In general, however, you should look for leaves that are thick, lightly colored and hard. The leaves should be slightly yellow-green, almost like a green apple. The leaves should also be free from bugs, obvious blemishes and mushy spots.

## WHERE TO GROW ORCHIDS

Orchids thrive in areas of high humidity and bright light such as windows, bright warm rooms and covered patios. Also under trees except in the winter months and during the rainy summer months.

## WATERING ORCHIDS

Watering is one of the most important aspects of the care of orchids. Ensure orchids receive a deep watering with excess water flowing liberally out of the drainage holes. Do not let water stay in the crown of leaves as this results in crown rot. The best time to water orchids is in the morning. Under watering results in dull looking drooping leaves with the bottom leaves drying and dropping off the plants. Over watering causes the roots to rot. Apart from too frequent watering, other causes of excessive moisture may be bad drainage, heavy soil or insufficient air circulation around the pots.

## FERTILIZING

Any orchid fertilizer will do and follow the instructions on frequency.

## HUMIDITY

The vast majority of orchids are from the tropics where high rainfall and humidity prevail. Water proof trays filled with pebbles work very well and misting is another way to increase humidity. Misting should be at least twice daily.

## POTS

Terracotta pots work very well especially with holes or openings on the side. Plastic pots are another option making sure they have drainage holes on the bottom and sides. Clear plastic pot allows you to see the condition of the roots.

## POTTING MATERIAL

1. Cocoa husk chunks-retains moisture while also providing sufficient air. Slow to decompose.
2. Fir bark is inexpensive but decomposes relatively quickly.
3. Lava rock never decomposes and drains well.
4. Perlite, sponge rock, jal provides good aeration and water retention.

## REPOTTING

-When the orchid roots are overflowing the pot, the plant is going over the edge of the pot and when the potting material is getting soggy and drains poorly. The best time to repot is when the plant starts new growth. Do not repot when in bloom.

## STEP BY STEP ORCHID POTTING

1. Fill the bottom of the pot with Styrofoam or broken clay pots or tile.
2. Remove the orchid from the pot being careful not to damage the roots.
3. Remove the old, loose, rotted potting material and any soft, damaged or dead roots.
4. If the roots are healthy, firm and filling the pot, put the orchid in a pot just one size larger than the one you removed it from, placing the older growth toward the back so the new growth has plenty of room. If the roots are rotted and in poor condition, repot the plant in a container of the same or one size smaller pot.
5. Place the plant in the pot so it's at the same depth as it was originally.
6. Press the fresh potting material into the pot and around the orchid roots with your thumbs and forefingers. The orchid should be secure in the pot so it doesn't wiggle—otherwise, the new roots won't form properly.

## PEST CONTROL

Aphids—Insecticidal soap, Isopropyl alcohol

Mealybugs—insecticidal soap, Neem oil

Thrips—Insecticidal soap, Neem oil

Scale—Insecticidal soap, Neem oil

Spider mites—Insecticidal soap

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