



The Orchid is Mother Nature's Masterpiece

by *Sussex County Master Gardeners*

Jessica R. Clark and Tony Pezone

Who can deny the magnificence of orchids, when roving garden centers, nurseries, grocery stores, or florists, and not be tempted to stock up our homes with their noble, graceful, and symmetrical blooms.

A common misconception is that orchids are delicate and difficult to grow. "Orchids have a reputation for being difficult to grow. But many varieties make excellent houseplants," states Sussex County Master Gardener Tony Pezone, who once had 40 orchids growing on windowsills in his home.



Master Gardener Tony Pezone Photo

Orchids were thought to be exotic, mysterious plants once suspected to have special powers. Orchid care is just different. In fact, the orchids that are commonly commercially available in the area are fun, attractive, and relatively easy to grow," continues Pezone.

"Once potted correctly in a filtered sunny location with a proper feed and water regimen, they will thrive and bloom in the home in the winter and can be moved outdoors in summer if desired."

The orchid family has over 880 different types (called genera) and over 22,000 species. Understanding the natural conditions in which orchids grow is critical to understanding what orchids need for their care. Most orchids are tropical plants which live as epiphytes or "air plants" hanging on to trees for support. Some orchids are lithophytes or

Orchid Care

Successful orchid care is understanding the basic requirements of the orchid for support, light, food, humidity, water, air movement, fertilization, and temperature. The basic requirements for proper orchid care, advises the University of Tennessee, and Pezone, are:

- Water once a week when they are dry or nearly dry. The water should be room temperature so as not to shock the plants. Collected rain water is best. Tap water is okay but do not use salt softened water.
- Position the orchid in a bright windowsill facing east or west. Pezone advises in winter, a south or southeast facing window is fine. In either case, the sunlight should be filtered through curtains or blinds. Direct sunlight will burn the plants.
- The pots should have drain holes and be sitting in trays, with stones in the tray bottom and water below the tops of the stones. There should be air movement. Plants like 50 percent humidity with day temperatures in the seventies and night temperatures in the low to mid-sixties. In summer, if you wish, put the plants outside in filtered, not direct, sunlight or locate them in the shade of other plants.
- Feed weekly with a fertilizer designed for orchids that states

“rock plants” growing on or among rocks. The remaining orchids are terrestrials which grow in loamy loose material such as rock fragments or organic particles of the jungle floor. Orchids can grow on jungle trees by grasping the tree bark and using the tree for support. Orchids get no nutrients from the tree itself – they are not parasites – they get a bit of food from the organic matter decaying in the crooks of branches or from animal droppings that wash down the tree in the rain. Orchids have adapted to absorb water from the jungle humidity.

The plants sold at nurseries, florists, etc. are likely to be hybrids, created by crossing different species and sometimes different genera to breed in desirable characteristics such as color, fragrance, flower size and ease of care. Today’s orchid hybrids are very rewarding house plants to grow and are relatively easy to care for. But when bought from a grower or nursery, ask for care recommendations. The commonly available orchids (from hardware or grocery stores, etc.) will do well just following the suggestions in this article.

Orchid Media

Orchids do not grow in dirt – dirt will smother their roots and kill the plant. The best media for an orchid is the one that best matches the type of orchid, the conditions in which it is growing, and one that promotes healthy drainage and good airflow. Most commonly available orchid media are fine.

Orchids require special fertilizer designed for orchids. If the leaf tips are turning light brown, cut back on the frequency of fertilization. “First water the plants with plain water and then with a dilute fertilizer solution,” advises Pezone. “This keeps salts from building up in the medium and the extra water will run through and stay in the tray to provide humidity. If the pot is very small, watering more often may be necessary. Orchids do not like ‘wet feet’ but they like humidity.”

Root growth is the best indicator of the health of the plant. The secret to growing healthy orchids is to grow healthy roots. Orchids may appear to be growing in ridiculously small pots and may be root bound at the store. If so, try to find ones with more open space or plan on repotting when arriving home. “For orchids growing in pots, we must be extra careful not to rot or smother the roots,” cautions Pezone. “Orchids should be planted in the smallest pot that the roots will fit in and the pot must have drain holes. All of the roots do not have to be in the pot or growing medium so if a lot of roots are outside of the medium, it may be necessary to mist the roots. The purpose of the pot is to support the plant and provide some humidity around the roots.” The plant may be staked until it establishes itself.

it encourages blooms. Repot in fresh orchid mix every two to three years after the blooms drop off or more often if the media is not drying out in a week.

The conditions on a Florida sun porch are different from a heated home in Delaware, yet with proper care, orchids can thrive in both.

Authors



Sussex County Master Gardener
Jessica R. Clark



Sussex County Master Gardener
Tony Pezone

Humidity and Light

Since our homes are not humid enough, a tray helps by holding some moisture and humidity around the roots. For orchids growing in pots, we must be extra careful not to rot or smother the roots. The roots should never be in the water in the tray.

Orchids have widely varying light needs. “High light” orchids do not require the kind of bright or direct sunshine that a tomato does and “low light” orchids will not be happy indefinitely in the middle of a room far away from any light source. Often, inadequate light inhibits orchid blooming. For the orchids generally available locally, the filtered light inside by a window or outside in a partially shaded location will be adequate. Some experimentation is needed to find the best location. Also, if the orchid is purchased from a grower ask about light requirements.

The temperature an orchid requires depends on the type of orchid. Some orchids enjoy a daytime temperature anywhere in the mid-seventies to mid-eighties and a night temperature 10 degrees or so lower. Dendrobiums like their temperature to be around 10 degrees cooler. Some orchids use the fall chill or the difference between the temperature at night and the temperature during the day as a cue to let them know the seasons are changing and it is time to bloom. “Cymbidiums need almost frost-type night temperatures to begin the blooming process. They would be the last ones to bring in from the garden in the fall. For others, the shorter or longer day light hours are the trigger. Orchids should be kept in darkness all night. Knowing the needs of the type of orchid will allow you to make adjustments in home temperatures or locations and enjoy years of beautiful blooms,” encourages Pezone.

Master Gardener Jerry Jurewicz conducts a virtual workshop on Growing Orchids. He presents guidelines for selecting, placing, and caring for orchids year-round to increase the likelihood of continued blooms. Visit udel.edu/master-gardeners/ and click on Gardener Workshops.

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