

Helpful Hints for Novice Growers

The following advice provides a quick reference to the essential points about orchid cultivation and a guide round the pitfalls that occasionally beset the grower.

Plan Carefully Do not be too great a hurry to start your orchid collection. Evaluate the conditions available before deciding on your first purchases and visit a few orchid shows and nurseries, especially those in your local area. Time spent planning is recouped many times over and only when you are certain that particular orchids will thrive in your particular situation is it wise to purchase.

Buy mature plant initially. Lower priced young plants or seedlings may seem a more attractive proposition, but it is important to the success of the venture to have a least some flowers during the first season. Avoid so-called cheap offers in the not-orchid popular press, and those orchids that have been languishing for generations in someone's back yard. Experience has shown that the former are frequently extremely poor in quality and the latter are probably infested with every possible ailment.

Cultural Requirements Specially constructed orchid houses are not essential, any greenhouse that is satisfactory for the culture of other plants will be adequate for orchids.

Temperature: As much as 16 degrees C higher in summer. Lower nocturnal temperatures – down to 10 degrees C are needed to initiate the flower buds in many genera.

Ventilation should be used at all times. It is essential to provide adequate air movement.

Shading is used to help control the temperature of the leaf surface as well as to reduce the light. Polyethylene lining installed to insulate in winter is also useful during the summer months to assist humidity although it will cause the temperature to rise.

Repotting is best completed when the new growth is developing, but try to avoid winter and periods of very hot weather. Wait until the very cold nights have finished but before the hot dry winds of early summer start to blow. Plants in bud or flower, or carrying a seed capsule, also prefer not to be repotted. However, if a plant looks sick at anytime, examine the roots and compost because a repot may be the answer. Avoid having a variety of composts. All orchids as they join the collection, should be repotted into your chosen standard mixture at the earliest opportunity. Do not keep diseased plants or runts. If the care and attention often lavished on these ailing orchids were redirected towards the thriving plants, the whole collection would benefit.

Water Provided the compost is sound, orchids need frequent watering during the growing season, but far less during the winter. If you are in doubt orchids are best kept on the dry side. Do not spray or water overhead when the foliage is warm, or when the sun is shining on the plants as the foliage may become burned.

Feeding: Apply fertiliser only in balance with other cultural requirements, such as light and warmth. Do not try to 'push' plants when growing conditions are poor, or when the plant is sick. Feeding will not compensate for cultural deficiencies.

Plant Hygiene Cleanliness in the culture of plants is essential. Apart from the aesthetic considerations, many weeds make excellent hosts for insect pests and should not be allowed to grow in the greenhouse. All new acquisitions, from whatever source, should be thoroughly inspected for insect pests and fungal diseases. Spraying with insecticide is advisable, particularly in spring and summer. Flower buds and new growths are especially susceptible to attack by aphids. It is not a good idea, however, to attempt protective spraying against fungal attack. Flower spikes and buds are a delicacy to snails and slugs, and only preventive action will avoid damage. Apply snail and slug killer just before the spike is expected, and a collar of cotton wool on the developing spike prevent these pests from attacking the flowers.

Flower Spikes Some genera or species produce flowers sequentially from the same spike. Therefore, the spike should not be removed – providing the plant is in good health – while it is still green.

Be Consistent Above all, do not change your cultural regime after hearing or reading about new techniques. Plants need time to adjust and cannot possibly thrive if the environment is radically changed each new season let alone three or four times a year. It is best to sieve out any cultural advice application to your situation and accept that there are many different routes to success.