

Picking Your Orchid

Picking a healthy orchid is a good idea even if the plant is meant as a gift or just a tabletop display. You want one with nice flowers, but there are other, more important factors to consider:

The wiggle factor. Gently grab the plant near the potting media and wiggle it a little. Epiphytic orchids (including [Dendrobium](#), [Cattleya](#), [Phalaenopsis](#), [Oncidium](#), and [Brassavola](#)) are usually potted in a coarse mixture of bark nuggets, charcoal, styrofoam, and other inorganic and organic material. 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. It's OK if a few roots are poking out of the top of the pot. If the orchid is potted inappropriately, but healthy, you can still buy it as long as you repot it at the first practical moment.

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. In the case of epiphytic orchids, they are designed to cling onto rough surfaces and anchor the plant high above the forest floor. 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. Some, like the ghost orchid, have no leaves at all and look like a small tangle of roots. In general, however, you should look for leaves that are thick, lightly coloured and hard. The leaves should be slightly yellow-green, almost like a green apple. Leaves that are too glossy green mean the plant has likely been overfed and it will not bloom as well. The leaves should also be free from bugs, obvious blemishes and mushy spots. Finally, make sure the growing point is not destroyed.

Check the bulbs. There are basically two kinds of epiphytic orchids: those that grow from a single growing point (Phalaenopsis, for example) and those that grow from a creeping rhizome (Cattleya, for example). The plants with a single stem are called monopodial, while the plants with a creeping rhizome are called sympodial. Sympodial orchids send up a fresh bulb, or pseudobulb, every year with new leaves and blooms. If you're buying this kind of orchid, make sure the pseudobulbs are plump and fat.

Count the flowers. If you're buying a plant in flower, resist the urge to buy a plant with all of its blooms already opened. Long-lasting orchid blooms might last for a month or more, but if you buy a plant with unopened blooms, you'll enjoy the overall show for longer. Do not buy plants with yellow or shriveled blooms, however, as these will most likely fall off.

Get a name. This might sound unnecessary, but it's a good idea to make sure your orchid has a tag with a full name on it whenever possible. **Don't buy plants labelled as "ORCHID" or "FLOWERING ORCHID."** It's better to buy a plant with the full species or hybrid name whenever possible. This will allow you to learn more about that particular plant, and if you decide to start a collection, it's always nice to know what you're growing.