

The Elusive Orchid Flower

Orchid plants are often treated like a bouquet of flowers without much hope of coaxing them to re-flower. Although orchids have a reputation for being challenging, they can actually be quite sturdy and adaptable. With bloom times ranging from December to April, orchids can add an elegant touch of color to your home during an otherwise drab and dreary season.

Overwatering an orchid is the surest way to kill it. Orchid roots need oxygen (as do all plant roots) and they have a very low tolerance for too much moisture. Their roots are prone to various root rots which leads to plant decline and eventual death. Orchids need weekly watering, but only in small quantities. You may have seen orchids who's tags say to water them with ice cubes. Although the temperature of icy water can damage orchid roots, growers and retailers know it is less damaging than overwatering. As you water your orchid, use room temperature water, but in the quantity of two ice cubes.

Orchids tolerate drought better than water-logged soils. Watering once a week is a guideline. To make sure your orchid is completely dry in between waterings, stick your finger down in the media. If you can feel moisture, wait to water.

The media you grow your orchids in will help to keep the roots dry. Potting orchids in a traditional potting media will hold moisture, leaving your orchid much more susceptible to root rots. Orchids are traditionally grown in wood chips, stones or another loosely packed, quick draining material. If you need to repot your orchid, look for those materials at either a local garden store, or a craft store.

In nature, orchids experience a significant change in day and night temperatures. To encourage your orchid to bloom, try to manipulate the temperature of your home so that the orchid experiences a 10 degree drop at night. This will help initiate bud development, especially in the fall and winter months. The temperatures orchids can tolerate, depend largely on the variety. Phalaenopsis prefer temperatures above 60 degrees F whereas cattleyas don't mind winter nights closer to 55 degrees. Cymbidium and odontoglossum orchids are adaptable to temperatures as low as 50 degrees. Most orchids prefer high temperatures below 90 degrees F.

Light requirements are another way to group orchids. Most orchids prefer at least 6 hours of light. Although they can tolerate less, more hours of light increases the likelihood of flowering. One way to gauge how much light your orchid is receiving is by looking at its leaves. The beautiful dark green leaves we strive to see on our other houseplants, can be a sign that your orchid isn't receiving enough light. Light to medium green leaves, with yellow tones, indicate that your plant is receiving enough light to induce flowering. Southern and Eastern facing windows are preferred for orchids as Northern window are too dark and Western windows are too hot. If your orchid leaves turn white, they are receiving too much light. These leaves will die off and signal you to move the plant so that it receives more indirect light. Something as simple as a sheer curtain can help you achieve the perfect light balance.

Orchids require less fertilizer than the typical house plant. With your weekly watering, apply a ¼ strength dose of a 20-20-20 fertilizer. Monthly, water without fertilizer to flush out excess salts. As you move into fall, switch to a fertilizer with higher phosphorus and lower nitrogen (such as 10-30-20) to encourage bud development. When in doubt, err on the side of less fertilizer.

Humidity is an important factor in keeping orchids happy. Increased humidity, at least 50%, promotes flowering. If you run a humidifier in your home, keep your orchid nearby. You can also create a humid

environment for your orchid by placing the pot on a bed of pebbles in a shallow tray. Add water to the tray until the stones are almost covered. Make sure the bottom of the pot is above the water line to avoid overwatering. Along with orchids, diseases also love high humidity. Air movement can help to mitigate these concerns. A ceiling fan or other small fan near the orchid will help air movement.

Orchid selection is a large part of homeowner success. To begin, purchase a plant with flowers already on it. You want to be aware of what the flowers look like, but you also want a plant that is mature enough to flower. Newly developing plants can take years to produce blooms, although these plants aren't typically available on the market.

Cattleya orchids are extremely fragrant and beautiful and can flower twice a year. They tolerate medium to bright light and drought. The downside to cattleya is the foliage. When not in flower, the plant isn't very attractive. For attractive foliage, phalaenopsis is a better choice. Phalaenopsis flowers can last three or more months and come most often in pinks and whites. Phalaenopsis prefer lower light and are not as drought tolerant as the cattleya orchids.

Although having a designated fan, humidifier, curtain, watering schedule and fertilizer may seem like a lot of work for one plant, anyone who has successfully coaxed an orchid to bloom again knows that the effort is well worth it. The elegance and distinctiveness of the orchid flower is a rich reward for the patient horticulturist.