

THE
Natural
GARDENER
— ORGANIC GARDENING HEADQUARTERS —
Epiphytic Orchids



Orchids are fascinating plants that have the ability to stop us in our tracks! Orchids comprise the largest family of flowering plants and have multiplied so profusely primarily with the help of insects that the orchids now number 30,000 species. With this variation comes a wide variety of growing conditions. Some orchids need full sun while others need deep shade. Most species in cultivation are epiphytic, meaning they grow on other plants or any good perch and do not need soil. The *Phalaenopsis* or Moth Orchid is the most commonly available species. Many species require similar care. ***Orchids are not as difficult to care for as most people think!***

Light: One of the most common problems with orchids is not giving them enough light. A trick to tell how much light your orchid needs is to look at the leaf thickness. The thicker the leaf the higher light they can take. The leaf of a *Phalaenopsis* is quite thick and fleshy while the leaf of the *Gongora* is very thin with the *Cymbidium* leaf falling somewhere in between. The *Phalaenopsis* because of its thick leaf can take brief periods of direct sunlight, however it will grow in even low light conditions. The *Gongora* on the other hand can only really take bright indirect light. The sun would be too intense for its thin leaves.

Media: Most epiphytic orchids just need a loose bark mixture or “**Orchid Bark**”. For plants that need more water mix in **coarse sphagnum moss** (not sphagnum **peat** moss). Good circulation around their roots helps prevent rot. Ideally use a pot with a drain hole, but anything from a wire basket to terra cotta or glazed ceramic to wood can be appropriate.

Water: Water orchids roughly every week unless fungus gnats or mold begins to develop. Submerge pots up to the crown in a large bowl or bucket and allow to soak for 10-15 min. We want time for the water to get absorbed into the bark. Let the bark just dry before watering it again. For pots without drain holes fill pot to ½’ from the top and let soak for 10-15 min. With your hand over the base of the plant and the media slowly tip the pot over making sure to allow **ALL** excess water to drain. In pots without drain holes a plastic pot that can be inserted into the decorative pot this allows for easy removal and inspection.

Fertilizing: The trick to orchid fertilization is “**Weakly Weekly**”. An extra-weak diluted fertilizer solution every time you water. A combination of **fish and seaweed** through the growing season, and switching to a **high phosphorous fertilizer** around bloom spike formation allows for optimal growth.

Repotting: Orchids really only need to be repotted every few years to refresh the media, prune out dead roots and up size the container if needed. While doing this be careful to minimize the damage to the live roots as they can be **fragile**. It is best to repot after the blooms have spent and new growth just begins to appear.

Blooming: Many species such as *Phalaenopsis* are triggered into blooming by cool nights. As a result of this most bloom in winter and last through the spring. If your healthy plants aren't blooming try setting the thermostat a little cooler or place closer to a window for a *light* draft in the winter and not long after you will see the flower stalk begin emerge. They can benefit from being put outside in the fall when low temperatures begin to drop into the 55-65 F range. Be sure to bring them in before the lows get below 55 F. Continue to water like normal through the bloom process. Once the flowers fall you can cut the stalk above the 3rd or 4th node. This will do 1 of 2 things. Either it will re-bloom or a new small plant will begin to develop from the bud at the top node. Once the new plant has 2-3 roots it can be removed and potted into its own pot.



Propagation: Most orchids are propagated by divisions. Any growing tip with roots can be separated to be a new individual. Each species can be different in exactly how to divide them as species have varying growth habits. *Phalaenopsis* can be propagated from the bloom stalk as discussed above and by cutting the stalk up into multiple cuttings each with a bud. These cuttings should be placed on moist sphagnum moss either covering to keep moisture in or misting regularly.

Pests and diseases: There are many pests that could affect orchids with the most common being Scale, Mealy Bugs and Spider Mites. All 3 of which will produce a sticky substance called “Honey Dew” on the surface of leaves and objects under the plant. This then becomes covered by sooty mold a fungus that eats the honey dew. This all can be wiped off and is a sign you have insects feeding on your plants. **Scale** insects can be found on almost any plant in the world with numerous species found on orchids, but in cultivation the soft brown scale seems to be the most common. Regular applications of *insecticidal soap*, *spinosad* or a *combination of both* have all proven quite effective on scale. **Mealy Bugs** are a common pest of just about any house plant. They are about 1/8- 1/4 long and produce cottony white fuzz. They tend to congregate where the leaves meet the stem. Regular applications of *insecticidal soap* can knock them back and get rid of them. **Spider Mites** are very tiny almost microscopic mites that feed on the plant, congregating on growing tips and the undersides of leaves. The foliage will begin to become dull and the leaves will appear to have fine debris on the leaf surface. When the infection has progressed very fine webbing will begin to be visible.