

Orchid Growing

As a new orchid grower, it always frustrated me that when I asked an experienced grower what I should do to grow my orchids better, I could never get a definite reply. It was always stated something like “it will depend on your conditions”.

For new orchid growers out there, nothing much has changed, but understanding what an orchid needs will go a long way toward growing your orchids better.

Most orchids are very hardy plants and will try to survive whatever we throw at them, at least for a while. It is not hard to grow an orchid (nature does it all the time), but it does take a bit more thought and work to grow and flower an orchid well, and I guess that is what we are all striving for. So what does an orchid need? Orchids are green plants, living things, so they need a source of energy. This comes from light. They need a source of light so that they can photosynthesise. Most of us are fortunate enough in our part of the world to have ample sunlight as our light source. However orchids can be grown under artificial light as well.

Plants also need water so they can transpire. This process evaporates water from tiny holes in the leaf called stomata. This helps cool the plant but the main function is to allow mineral nutrients dissolved in water to be transported from the roots up to the leaves. There the plant uses the energy from light and the nutrients and water to build sugars and proteins so that the plant can grow. This might sound a bit technical, but it is important to understand that orchids have specific needs. It is in managing some of these requirements that determines how well an orchid grows.

The first thing to remember is that the different orchids we grow originate from species that come from different countries and/or ecosystems. Each plant is uniquely adapted to where it comes from and to grow well it needs the conditions it has adapted to. It is not difficult to provide different conditions in the same shade house. Just moving a plant higher or lower, shadier or into more light, can make a huge difference to how well it grows. A bit of thought, and sometimes trial and error, will allow you to find the spots that suit different orchids. Hybrids care is often a bit easier to grow than species because they have a mixture of genes and are often a bit more forgiving, so for the novice it may be better to start with these.

The other thing to remember is that not all plants will grow well. In nature, survival of the fittest ensures that only a few orchid seedlings survive, and those have to be well suited to their environment.

Nurseries produce hundreds of thousands of seedlings that have not had to struggle to survive. Some will die a lingering death in your shade house! That is just a fact of orchid growing and happens to the best of growers.

Light: This is one of the most important factors in growing orchids well. Too much light and the plant will be stressed. Not enough light and the plant will often not flower. In our area, it would be best to start with 50% (Light) or 70% (Medium) shade cloth. Remember a higher and larger shade house lets more light in than smaller, lower ones. It is always easier to add a second or third layer of shade cloth on top to

cut down the light than to replace all the shade cloth because it is too dark. Plants that like high light (Dens, Vandas, Catts) can be grown higher while plants that prefer lower light (Phals, Maudiae Paphs) can be grown lower down. Remember to make allowances for watering though as high light plants generally like plenty of water in the growing season and lower light plants might not need as much.

Water: Rainwater is the best, but few of us have this luxury all year around. Most town water supplies are acceptable (Hervey Bay supply is ok) but probably best to get the ph and dissolved salts checked in other areas. A ph between 6 and 7 is best. Dam water and bore water can work as long as the ph and salinity is checked. Once you have the water, when to water is the next part of the puzzle. Most epiphytic orchids (grown on trees or rocks) need to dry out between watering. Drying out causes the plant to produce more roots, so that it can take up more nutrients. Waterlogged potting mix becomes anaerobic (lack of oxygen) and as plant roots are alive and need oxygen, a waterlogged potting mix will kill them. Many more orchids have been killed by over watering than by under watering. If you think it needs to be watered, try waiting another day. Good air movement in the shade house is important to allow the plants to dry out, which also helps to control fungal and bacterial rot.

Fertiliser: Not that important in the short term. Most orchids grown in our area are epiphytes so have adapted to limited nutrients in nature. Good fertilizing will improve the rate of growth, but just about any complete fertilizer at half strength will be ok. Frequency will depend on how much time you have. Once a fortnight (or weekly) is fine.

Pest and Diseases: Orchids have plenty of pests, but if the other conditions are right they won't pose too much of a problem and can be controlled with either a regular preventative spraying routine, or keep an eye on your plants and treat as needed. If you have the time, a regular inspection of each plant can allow you to treat potential problems before they become a real problem.

Become an orchid whisperer – watch your plants and they will tell you how they are doing, but this takes time and practice. Don't make changes too often though as it often takes a few weeks to see the effect of any change in growing conditions in your plants.