



Orchid Fact Sheet

"Doug, maybe you could do a fact sheet on growing Orchids," asked one of our happy band of listeners. No sooner said than done – but knowing Doug it will be all about compost and other unmentionable things...just don't forget – this time you asked for it, so you only have yourselves to blame!

But just before I hand you over to Doug, there is just enough room left to remind you that if you've got any more questions, please do give us a call on Sunday mornings – you know the numbers!

I hope to be speaking with you on-air soon.

Blair Jacobs

Orchids are plants that are easy to become passionate about. In fact I am sure that every good gardener remembers their first Orchid in much the same way they remember their first kiss...

They might have been hesitant and unsure about what to do; but there can be no doubt about it- it was going to be good while it lasted!

But nurturing and caring for something so outstandingly beautiful and delicate can be daunting, (I am referring to the orchids now!) so the pleasure of receiving an orchid is often tinged with worry and guilt. In particular if it was given as a gift; after all, the giver could pop round anytime for a cup of tea and an inspection!

But the good news is that Orchids are easy, and while they used to be expensive they are now quite cheap thanks to new production methods.

So whether your orchid was a gift or a bargain; read on to find out how to keep it happy, healthy and green!

Doug Stewart

1. A short biology lesson – or understanding your Orchid

There are over 100 000 types of orchids, and the three that we will be looking at in this fact sheet are the most common and the most easy ones to grow.

Most orchids are *epiphytes*, (plants that grow on other plants). In the wild they often cling to the branches of trees to get to the light they love; whilst dangling their fleshy roots into the humid air. These are often green or grey in colour, and are able to take all the water the plant needs from the surrounding air.

Orchids are used to storing water and plant food in thick leaves, or swollen structures that look like small bulbs, so when it's wet and humid they store all the water they can get. Then when it's drier they use it up.

2. How to make your Orchid feel at home

Transforming the front room into a humid jungle with plenty of tree trunks for support would be ideal, but there are less drastic things that can be done to make your Orchid feel at home...

For example Orchids love:

- ♦ Air around their roots. This is why the compost used to grow orchids is very open. In fact they are happy growing in small pieces of bark, which creates humid pockets of air around the roots which they love.
- ♦ To dangle their roots out of the pot, this is just something they like doing! It doesn't mean they need re-potting, or that the roots need sticking back into the pot! Just let them dangle to keep your orchid happy. (Constantly putting them back in the compost can even make your orchid sulk.)
- ♦ To be watered, so they can fill their water stores up; but then like to be left to dry out a little as well. Once a fortnight is more than enough water in the winter.
- ♦ Rain water. They much prefer rain water that has been brought in and allowed to get to room temperature to water out of the tap. No water butt? They like bottled still spring water!

- ◆ Misting, they like rain water at room temperature misted onto their leaves and dangling roots first thing in the morning. It reminds them of home, keeps their leaves clean and stops them drying out in our dry houses.
- ◆ To be warm but not hot, 60°F is ideal, and they can even cope with 50°F during the winter. They really don't like it too hot.
- ◆ Polystyrene, this keeps the compost really open, and combined with making extra drainage holes in pots will keep them happy. Say 1/3 Polystyrene chunks at the bottom of the pot, then small bark nuggets.
- ◆ Feeding. They like a little bit of weak liquid feed in the growing season (April – August)
- ◆ Beauty treatments! They can get a bit dry and dusty. So a misting of water over the leaves, followed by a buff up with a cotton wool ball dipped in 50% full fat milk: 50% water will leave a nice shine to the leaves.

3. Horses for Courses

The three most popular orchids in Britain are:

- ◆ Cymbidiums, have upright leaves with little bulbs at the base.
- ◆ Dendrobiums, these have leaves all the way up the flower spike.
- ◆ Phalaenopsis, whose leaves are like great lolloping tongues hung over the edge of the pot.

Caring for your Cymbidium

Cymbidiums come from Northern India right up into the Himalaya, so they like cool conditions, in particular cold nights.

As soon as the flowers start to go over the spike should be removed, as low as possible on the plant and this will encourage the plant to make new leafy growth.

This new growth needs to be allowed to develop through the summer, so keep the plant moist, not wet, and feed it regularly with a general houseplant feed. At the end of August, coming into September the plant will be starting to develop its flowers, and to encourage this it should be given weak tomato feed.

To initiate the flower spike the plant needs to experience a good difference between day and night temperatures. One way of achieving this is to grow it in the house during the day,

then put it outside on cold but not frosty nights.

When it has filled its pot, it can be re-potted in the spring, and should fill this new pot over the next 12 months if it is growing strongly.

Caring for your Dendrobium

Dendrobiums are gaining in popularity and just love sunlight. So an east or even better west facing window will be ideal.

When they are in active growth, (April - August) they need to be kept well fed and watered (but not too wet). However they also go through resting phases (autumn and winter) when they need to be kept quite dry.

Like the Cymbidium they are happiest when in a cooler room, between about 60°F and 70°F.

They actually enjoy the sun so much that they will be happy growing outside in the garden during the summer, but if its very sunny, they would prefer a little dappled shade. And watch out for slugs!

They prefer to be pot bound, and do best in the smallest pot they can be crammed into! So re-pot only when they are showing a determined attempt to escape or are top heavy and falling over.

Like the Cymbidiums they need cool nights to initiate their

flowers, and some growers even put their plants in the fridge overnight during the resting period! (Honest!)

Caring for your Phalaenopsis

Phalaenopsis can almost stay in flower for 12 months of the year.

They grow on trees and prefer to be grown in a clear container so that the roots can see the sun.

They also like moist air around the roots, so misting just the aerial roots hung out of the pot, or standing the pot on a tray with gravel and water in it will keep the air moist around them. (The water in the tray must never come into contact with the bottom of the pot, or the compost will draw it up and the plant will literally drown.

Once the flowers have gone over, the stem should be cut back, but not all the way. Just to a node, (which is a dormant bud on the flower stem) with a bit of luck a new flower spike will develop very quickly and within a few weeks the plant will be in flower again.

A weak ¼ strength feed with every watering will keep it growing.

They like to be slightly warmer than Cymbidiums but out of strong direct sunlight which can scorch the leaves.