

A Beginner's Guide to Orchids

By Naperville Garden Club member Mary F.

Do you admire orchids from afar or hesitate to spend upwards of twenty dollars on a plant you feel you're sure to kill? Relax, and read on. Any reputation orchids may have for being finicky stems from a misunderstanding about their origins.

In nature, orchids grow primarily in trees as epiphytes (air plants) or in the ground as terrestrials. Epiphytes will make the best houseplants even though their needs for light, water, humidity, growing medium and fertilizer can be different from ordinary houseplants. Different need not be synonymous with difficult. Success with orchids is this simple: identify the existing conditions in your home or those easy to modify, then select orchids that nature has outfitted to like or even love living in these conditions. Can you believe some 750 genera and 17,500 species of these sublime beauties exist in nature? These sought after survivors are found all over the world (except in permafrost or extreme aridity) and continue to enthrall hobbyists.

As a beginner, your chances for success go up if you select from kinds rated "beginner" which are often available from local stores and mass merchants. Orchids frequently encountered in such places include phalaenopsis, oncidiums, cymbidiums, and Dendrobium phalaenopsis. I suggest starting with a phalaenopsis or "moth orchid". They thrive in intermediate to warm temps and low light. Their attractive foliage and beautiful long lasting blossoms make them very popular. My white phalaenopsis, which is about four years old now, graced my kitchen this summer for a full three months with an amazing 23 blossoms at once!

The plants you find at local retailers have been through some trying times. Look at the leaves. Slight damage is okay, but they should be firm and unbroken. The roots should be a healthy white with greenish tips. A plant with an inflorescence (flower cluster) that is beginning is ideal. One or two of the lowest flowers will be open, but the rest should be in bud. Make sure you like the color, because except for slight variations in size and intensity the plant will always produce flowers like the ones you see. The blooming season is usually from winter to spring. Keep the bark planting medium moist but not soggy and try to maintain high humidity. I water only about once per week and every other watering I feed with a professional orchid 30-10-10 fertilizer. When the flowers fade, cut the stalk just below the node that produced the first flower. If all goes well, the stem will branch and flower again, and you will enjoy many months of blooms. Phalaenopsis are often more difficult to propagate because they can't be divided, however they produce offshoots called keikis (key-key). The leaves of a keikis form first, followed by the roots. When the roots are one to two inches long, twist or cut the keikis off and plant separately in fine bark. Under good growing conditions a keikis will reach flowering size within two years. With a little patience and benign neglect, these flamboyant flowers will thrive in your care. As little as ten years ago, I lost every orchid I ever purchased. Now my home contains numerous healthy orchids, some blooming, some resting and my babies....the keikis.

Remember: Temp 65-90 during the day and 55-70 at night. Water every 5-7 days and avoid wet foliage. Be sure light is moderate with no direct sun. Fertilizer twice monthly. Repot every other year in spring. * If they are about to flower, repot after flowering. Invest regularly in flowering orchids and you will build a collection that blooms in all seasons.

P.S. An orchid and a copy of this article would make a lovely gift at any time of the year. Good luck!