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How to Care for Orchids



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Botanical name:
Orchidaceae
family

Plant type:
[Houseplant](#)

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Growing Orchid Flowers: Watering, Lighting, Repotting, and More

By [Catherine Boeckmann](#)
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Orchids have no equal: They are breathtakingly beautiful, delicate, long-blooming, long-lived, fascinating in fragrance and form, and extremely varied. Few pleasures in gardening surpass the thrill of seeing orchids thrive and bloom. Here's everything you should know about growing orchids and caring for orchids—and we've listed the most common orchid types, too!

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Once rare and expensive, orchids now outsell every other houseplant, surpassing even [African violets](#), chrysan-

cultivation that used to take 7 years
from seed to bloom now takes only
2 years.

About Orchids

The orchid family is one of the largest in the realm of flowering plants: More than 25,000 species grow naturally, on every continent except Antarctica. The greatest concentration of orchid varieties is found in the tropical regions of the world, namely in Asia and Central and South America. In most of North America, orchids must be grown indoors (exceptions include native species such as the lady's slipper).

- Every orchid has a characteristic, highly evolved lip, a petal that protrudes in a blossom of three petals and three sepals, some fused together.
- Every orchid has evolved to attract

led to orchids' enormous variety in appearance.

- Orchids are either **epiphytic** (air-growing) or **terrestrial** (earth-growing); most tropical orchids are epiphytic. In the wild, epiphytes cling to trees and stumps, drawing moisture from the mist and rain and decomposing leaves.

Read Next

- [Orchid Care: Watering, Light, Fertilizer, and Tips](#)
- [For the Love of Orchids](#)
- [How to Grow Roses: The Complete Rose Flower Guide](#)

PLANTING

We've all seen orchids at supermarkets and home stores and wondered if they're a wise purchase. "Absolutely," says Marc Hachadourian, Curator of Glasshouse Collections for the New York Botanical Garden. "Inexpensive

choose a strong, healthy-looking plant.”

Most store-bought orchids come packaged in cheap plastic pots with the roots packed in soaked sphagnum moss. This is a problem, as they need air flow to avoid root rot. Once you bring yours home, you should consider repotting it.

Repotting Orchids

General Potting Tips

- Do not repot while a plant is flowering, as the blooms may suffer. Enjoy the flowers, then cut off the spent flower spike with sterile snippers and repot the orchid.
- When an orchid spills out of its pot, the roots trail down the sides of the pot, or the growing medium is reduced to crumbs, it's time for repotting. Repot at the beginning of

- Orchids should be so snug in their pots that you can pick up the plant by its leaves and not shake out the roots.

How to Repot an Orchid

1. Carefully remove the orchid from its existing pot. New orchids are typically sold in thin plastic containers, which can be cut away.
2. Dispose of the old potting medium, especially if it looks as if it's breaking down or rotting.
3. Inspect the orchid's roots, cutting off any that are blackened, hollow, spongy, or otherwise damaged. Healthy roots look white or green.
4. Hold the plant upright in the new pot and fill in around it with new potting media, tamping down gently, to about an inch from the top of the pot.
5. Water the orchid well to settle the media around its roots. Add more media if necessary.

take hold of the new media. Green bamboo and curly willow make for attractive stakes.

Orchid Growing Medium

- Never plant an orchid in standard potting soil. All orchids—especially epiphytic species—need a lot of air around their roots. The best medium is one that is very light, porous, and fast-draining.
- Large plants with older roots do better in coarser growing media.
- Most garden stores sell special orchid potting mixes:
 - Orchid potting mixes are made of fine, medium, or coarse fir bark chunks, which are usually combined with perlite, peat, or sphagnum moss, and horticultural charcoal. (You can mix up your own, using four to six parts bark to one part each of the other components.)

- Orchids are commonly grown in terra cotta pots because they allow for extra airflow. There are even special orchid pots that have wide drainage slits around the sides of the pot. These “peepholes” allow for air movement and also make it easier to check on the health of the roots.
- Select a pot large enough to allow at least an inch of growing space around the roots.

GROWING

In their native habitats, orchids grow like weeds, but they are inclined to homesickness as houseplants. For the best results, provide the conditions they prefer. Some species have individual preferences, but all need a balance of light, air, water, food, rest, and, from time to time, a new pot in order to thrive.

Of course, orchids are renowned for their beautiful flowers, which can seem to last forever. Orchids can be picky about blooming, however. Here are answers to a few common orchid flower questions:

- **How often do orchids bloom?** It depends on the type of orchid. Phalaenopsis orchids will readily bloom every few months, while other types may be limited to once or twice a year.
- **How long do orchid flowers last?** Depending on the species, orchid flowers can last anywhere from several days to several weeks. Generally speaking, they will last longer if the orchid is kept in a cool spot, is watered sufficiently, and isn't stressed.
- **When should I cut the flower spike?** As soon as the flowers wilt and begin to drop off the stem (called a "senile"), it can be cut

any leaves or roots as well.

Phalaenopsis orchids are an exception: they will often produce more flowers from the same flower spike, so don't be too quick to snip it once the flowers fade. In fact, leaving the flower spike on Phalaenopsis orchids can speed up the time between blooms.

- **Why won't my orchid bloom?** Your orchid is most likely not getting enough light. Read more about lighting below!

Lighting

- Without adequate light, expect lush growth but no flowers. Insufficient light is the most common reason for failure to bloom.
- These plants thrive in strong light, but direct sunlight can burn orchids. Bright, indirect light from an eastern or southern window is ideal.

• Leaf color is a good indicator of the

- **Bright green leaves** indicate a happy, healthy plant.
- **Dark green leaves** signal that a plant is not getting enough light.
- **Yellowish-green or red leaves** indicate that a plant is getting too much light.
- If you suspect that your orchid is exposed to too much light, feel the leaves. If they feel noticeably warmer than the surrounding air, move the plant to a location with less intense brightness.



Air Circulation

- Orchids must also have fresh, cir-

survival. Air in motion helps to evaporate stagnant water, which is a breeding ground for fungi and bacteria that are trapped during watering.

- Ventilation also helps orchids to tolerate intense light that would otherwise burn the leaves. Create gentle breezes: Open windows in the summer and use an oscillating fan in winter. Without ventilation, orchids may eventually die from rot, lack of carbon dioxide, or disease.

Watering

- Experts say that more orchids are killed by incorrect watering than by any other cause. Orchids should be watered just as they dry out. Overwatering may lead to rot, which kills orchid roots.
- **Do not water orchids with ice cubes!** Most orchid houseplants are tropical species and will not survive

if someone dumped a bucket of ice on you at the beach!)

- To know when to water, pick up the potted orchid and examine it: Is the potting mix dry? Does the pot feel light? This means that it probably needs a drink.
- Another way to tell if an orchid is thirsty is to look at its roots:
 - **Plump white roots** indicate a healthy orchid that's being watered correctly. When watered, healthy roots should turn bright green.
 - **Shriveled gray roots** signal that the orchid needs more water.
 - **Shriveled or spongy brown and black roots** are a sign of rot, so cut down on watering.
- In general, douse plants early in the day with tepid water once a week in winter and twice a week in warmer weather. Water until the water runs out of the pot freely; this also

the humidity up. Terrestrials prefer to be kept slightly more damp than epiphytes.

Fertilizing

- As a general rule, fertilize orchids every 2 weeks during peak growth (spring and summer) and once a month during dormancy (fall and winter). Use a 30-10-10 fertilizer or orchid food, diluted to half strength.
- Approaching bloom, play it safe with a balanced fertilizer, such as 20-20-20.
- Many experienced growers fertilize “weekly, weakly.”

Dormancy

- Many orchids need a period of dormancy—or rest—generally in winter. During this time, when you should reduce or stop fertilizing, plants strengthen their root systems, grow leaves, and stockpile energy for

Typically, an orchid can rebloom every 8 to 12 months.

Types

There are many beautiful orchid varieties out there today. It can get overwhelming, so we have highlighted some of the most common types to get you started.

- **Cattleya, the “classic orchid”** (epiphytic, or air-growing): The showy “corsage orchid” has ruffled blossoms in luminous colors and a rich, heady, hint-of-vanilla scent. To achieve blooms, it requires 5 to 6 hours of light per day. Move it outside in the summer, and water copiously.



- **Oncidium, the “dancing lady orchid”** (usually epiphytic): Easy-to-grow Oncidium bears small flowers that sway like dancing ballerinas. These fast-growing, fanciful flowers appear in every size, shape, and color that you can imagine. It needs filtered light 5 to 8 hours a day.



Oncidium

- **Phalaenopsis, the “moth orchid”** (epiphytic): The best choice for beginners, this is easy to tend and fast-growing, producing lavish sprays of white, pink, yellow, red, spotted or striped blossoms that last for 3 to 6 weeks. It's very cold sensitive and needs a lot of humidity. Feed it well.



Phalaenopsis

- **Cymbidium, the “buttonhole orchid”** (usually terrestrial, or earth-growing): Expect intricate, arching sprays with double rows of big (3- to 5-inch) bold blossoms in colors from pastel to primary. Native in many parts of Asia, cool-loving Cymbidiums are really outdoor orchids; in southern California, they’re ideal garden plants. Cymbidiums are often fragrant, especially those with green flowers.



- **Paphiopedilum, the “slipper orchid”** (terrestrial): Often called “Lady’s Slippers,” this orchid is great for beginners and one of the easiest orchids to grow. Slipper orchids have long-lasting blooms, flaunting outlandish flowers in sensational and mysterious hues. They also have patterned foliage that is attractive even when not in bloom. Lady’s Slippers come in many colors and patterns.



Paphiopedilum

- **Dendrobium, the “orchid of many faces”** (usually epiphytic): This light-loving plant thrives when it’s potbound, can’t stand to have wet feet, and doesn’t like to be dis-

small pot and repot it only every few years.



Dendrobium

Dyed Orchids

You may occasionally see Phalaenopsis orchids with neon blue or bright orange flowers for sale in stores.

Unfortunately, these flowers have been dyed, which means that the flower will not be the same bright color if the plant blooms again. There's nothing wrong with buying these plants, but you should know that they'll produce only white or light pink flowers in the future.

Fragrant Orchids

Some orchids have an amazing fragrance. Among the most sweet-smelling are...

- *Angranthes grandalena*: sweet jasmine
- *Brassavola nodosa*: freesia or lily-of-the-valley
- *Cattleya walkeriana* and hybrids: cinnamon and vanilla
- *Maxillaria tenuifolia*: roasted coconut
- *Miltoniopsis santanaei*: roses
- *Neofinetia falcata*: jasmine
- *Oncidium* 'Sharry Baby': vanilla and chocolate
- *Phalaenopsis bellina*: freesia with a touch of lemon
- *Phalaenopsis violacea*: spicy, cinnamon
- *Rhynchostylis gigantea*: powerful citrus
- *Zygopetalum*: hyacinth

CARDENING PRODUCTS

PESTS/DISEASES

Orchids are relatively pest-free plants, but here are some possible pests. All of these can be addressed first with non-chemical options:

Wash off with warm water and insecticidal soap OR use a cotton swab and Isopropyl alcohol OR use Neem Oil OR Superior Horticultural Oils.

- **Aphids**: Look for clear sticky drop-lets anywhere on your plant.
- **Scale**: Check on the undersides of the leaves near the middle vein of the leaf or on the edges of the leaf. Note, when rubbing off these pests, note that they have a hard scaly shell that must be penetrated or broken).
- **Mealybugs**: Look for a white cottony mass on the top right petal and column. Multiple insecticide treatments are usually necessary to

Orthene (Acephate) for the most severe infestations.

- **Thrips**: These tiny gnat-like creatures look like light streaks on the flowers or stippling on the leaves. The flower buds are also usually deformed. Neem is usually effective.
- **Spider mites**: These tiny guys show up as fine webbing on the leaves or a stippling effect. Wash off with a strong stream of warm soapy water. Then spray with Insecticidal Soap.
- **Snails and Slugs** come out at night and leave a slimy trail, so if you suspect them, take a flashlight in the evening to search for these culprits. Look under your pots, too. Use (safe) Sluggo® baits, or try the old beer trick: Put out a shallow plate (1/2-inch deep) of beer, and slugs will be in the liquid the next morning.

Orchids rarely suffer from disease but

which listed some common ones:

- **Root rot** may occur when roots are kept too wet. Provide adequate air-flow and water according to the tips above, and your orchid shouldn't have any issues.
- **Crown rot** causes the center growing point to turn black or rot. Don't leave water in the crown of the plant or it will invite disease. It's usually not salvageable.
- **Leaf Spot** is the damage that most fungal and bacterial diseases leave behind are circular or oblong spots on the foliage or flowers. You could remove diseased leaves by cutting the leaf off about 1/2 inch to 1 inch into healthy leaf tissue that shows no signs of the disease. Be careful not to cut into the diseased tissue and then into healthy tissue, or you'll spread the disease.

WIT AND WISDOM

Many orchids produce babies! They are small plants or “keikis” that you can remove and repot to grow more orchids!

[See how to pot an orchid keiki.](#)

Did You Know?

Orchids cleverly produce flowers resembling the pollinator that they want to attract. *Ophrys apifera* (below) has the appearance of a female bee visiting a pink flower. Thus, it attracts the attention of male bees. When one lands on the orchid, he’s dusted with pollen, which he then spreads when he flies away.

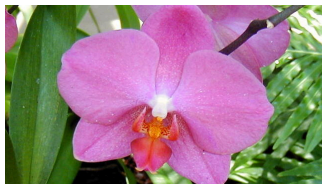


HOUSEPLANT GUIDES**ABOUT THE AUTHOR****Catherine Boeckmann**

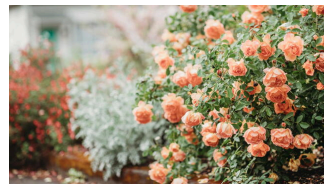
Catherine Boeckmann loves nature, stargazing, and gardening so it's not surprising that she and The Old Farmer's Almanac found each other. She leads digital content for the Almanac website, and is also a certified master gardener in the state of Indiana. [Read More from Catherine Boeckmann](#)

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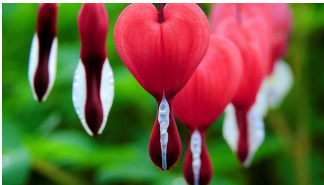
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KaySea Forsyth (not verified) 3 months 1 week ago

Thanks for the know how and amazing tips.

I've had a couple few orchids over the years and it seems every one no matter where I've lived or where it's placed when it's flowering it'll have some open and some closed buds. The closed buds vary in size as some are ready to pop open and some are teeny tiny still. The teeny tiny buds always seems to dry/wilt/fall away. The flowers run their course. The bigger buds open and run their course but never ever do the teeny tiny buds. Any thoughts as to why??

I wish I had a 24/7 live orchid expert available at my finger tips. I really hope this question gets answered. I feel like I've lost out on alot of flower time over the years. Thank you kindly in advance for your reply.

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REPLY**The Editors** 3 months 1 week ago

Hi KaySea,

Sorry to hear about your orchids. They certainly can be finicky. From what you described, it sounds like your orchid is going through what is known as bud blast. Bud blast occurs when either all or some buds wither and fall from an otherwise healthy plant, and may happen for a number of reasons. Sudden temperature changes, incorrect watering (either too much or too little), improper fertilization, incorrect lighting (too much direct sun or not enough), lack of humidity, or pest issues are all causes that can lead to bud blast. If you suspect one of these are the issue, you

it. It might take some trial and error to get to the root of the issue.

Another idea is that depending on the last time you repotted your orchid, it might be time to give it a new home with new potting mix. Follow the instructions above and pay close attention to the potting mix used because standard potting mix is not recommended for orchids as it needs to be very light, porous, and fast-draining.

Hope this helps!

REPLY

Julie Moors (not verified) 11 months 2 weeks ago

My daughter give me a Phalaenopsis, I believe -store bought, for mother's day. The two bottom leaves look cracked, brown line,

and cracked line on the bottom leaves. The top leaves are fine.

REPLY

Karen (not verified) 1 year 6 months ago

I am a first time orchid owner. It bloomed beautifully and it has seemed very healthy until recently. It is in an organic bark medium, the pot is ceramic with air holes all around and I only water it once a week with a shot glass of water. There are two new leaves growing and they seemed to be doing very well; however, the one old leaf turned yellow and fell off and just this week the other original leaf fell off. Today I looked at the two new leaves and they seem soft and limp almost like the plant is falling off it's roots. What do you recommend?

REPLY

Otter (not verified) 1 year 3 months ago

That's way too little water for any

that you shouldn't overwater, that's actually referring to frequency rather than amount. Each plant has its own requirements in terms of how dry the soil should be before you re-water (and if you want to keep them alive, you NEED to do research), but in almost all cases, what you want to do is thoroughly saturate the soil/planting medium every time you water. Make sure your pot has good drainage, so no standing water will remain in the bottom, and then keep watering until the pot feels heavy (I'd say "until water runs out the bottom," but that's really not an accurate measurement as sometimes, the water will run out immediately yet the soil's still dry). For moooooost plants, you don't water again until you can stick your finger down about an inch into the soil and it all feels

DO NOT

times it dries out faster! You really need to be hands-on in this hobby!

Summary:

- 1) Use pot with good drainage, and completely saturate soil.
 - 2) Get a feel for how your pots feel when dried out vs saturated: that'll help you know if the soil has soaked up water.
 - 3) Research your individual plant, but generally do not water again until top inch of soil is dried out.
- For orchid bark/moss, a clear pot works best to see if everything looks dried out.

REPLY

The Editors 1 year 6 months ago

Hi Karen,

too little light, temperature stress, and improper watering. In your case, it sounds as though your orchid is receiving too little water, which is causing the leaves to yellow and soften.

Without access to enough water, orchids can not absorb the vital nutrients it needs to stay happy and healthy. A shot glass worth of water once a week appears to be too little for its needs.

You can give your orchid a thorough watering. Hold the pot under a running faucet, using lukewarm (tepid) water, until water runs out of the drainage holes at the bottom. This will thoroughly moisten the potting medium.

Then wait for the growing medium to dry before watering it again. The rule of thumb is to wa-

It may take a few days for your orchid to perk up from its dehydrated state, so keep an eye on it and check the medium often to make sure it is not drying out too much between waterings.

REPLY

Judy F (not verified) 2 years 1 month ago

I have a new phalenopsis and the inner clear plastic pot fits very tightly inside the decorative outer pot. Should there be more room between the 2 pots to let air circulate around the roots or will more room cause the plant to dry out?

REPLY

The Editors 2 years 1 month ago

Is the inner plastic pot solid plastic or does it have holes for air

roots to “breathe” by giving them a bit more space. Phalaenopsis orchids are epiphytes, which means that they grow on tree branches, cliff faces, logs, or other structures—anywhere that isn’t directly in the dirt. This means that they prefer to have a bit of air flow around their roots. They are “aerial roots,” after all! It does mean that the roots will dry out more quickly, but this is actually preferable!

REPLY

Judy F (not verified) 2 years 1 month ago

Thank you! The inner pot has slots and holes. I'll get a larger outer pot.

REPLY

Hi I have a orchid and i noticed i have little
black flying bugs what do i do to get rid of
them Thank you

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