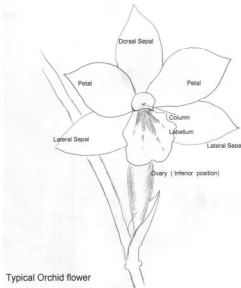


Basic Orchid Culture

The orchid family is the second largest plant family known to science - the largest being that of the grasses. Orchids are found growing on every continent, with the exception of Antarctica. They are found growing at all elevations from sea level to several thousand metres and at all latitudes from the equator to well within the Arctic circle.



What is an orchid? It is any flower which consists of three petals and three sepals. Sepals protect a flower bud before the petals emerge. In orchids the sepals are usually the same colour as the petals. The third petal is modified in that it is usually highly coloured or intricately patterned in order to attract the plant's natural pollinator to the reproductive portion of the bloom.

There are basically two types of orchid, terrestrial (those living in soil) and epiphytic (those living attached to a host, be it a tree, rock or cliff face). Australia boasts a wonderful array of terrestrial orchids. Visitors flock to Western Australia to see hectares of these magnificent, oddly interesting blooms. Unfortunately these plants will not transplant. Their specific requirements with regard to soil type and specific symbiotic soil fungi preclude them from consideration for cultivation in Queensland.

The epiphytic orchids are those we have come to expect to see in cultivation. In Queensland most of these plants thrive in all areas where they maybe protected from regular frosts. In coastal Queensland plants grow in shadehouses, attached to trees in gardens or hung from trees by means of wire hangers.

There are many trees which form excellent hosts to an orchid collection: poincianas, jacarandas, tipuanas, frangipannis, callistemons, melaleucas and most fruit trees. In fact any tree with a tenacious bark is a suitable host tree for orchids. Unfortunately eucalypts shed their bark annually and with it they will also shed any orchids which may have established. The best means for attaching orchids is by tying them directly to the host with stocking material. It is vitally important that the plants are held firmly to their host so that the new roots do not wear away with movement of the plant.

Basically, a tree forms a natural growing site for an orchid and other plants. The canopy of leaves overhead gives orchids the correct amount of light, protects the plants from strong winds and, in winter, from frost. It is important that orchids be grown on benches off the ground to ensure good drainage and air movement. Pots of orchids placed on the ground will, in time, sink into the soil which will cause drainage difficulties.

Most orchids prefer 50% shade. In nature the bulk of orchid plants grow in the upper most branches of trees rather than in the sheltered depths of the jungle or rainforest. Most of the trees listed above provide suitable shade. If your plants are grown under shade house conditions the calculated degree of shade should be 50%. A good amount of light will provide your plants with strong growth which will result in a strong show of blooms in season.

Plants grown under very shaded conditions are lush in their growth but are usually shy bloomers. If orchids are grown under shade house conditions do not hesitate to grow them along with companion plants. Orchids may occupy the upper strata of the shade house and they will increase the shade for more tender foliage plants. The more you can squeeze into an orchid area, the happier and healthier all your plants will appear as high humidity is created by having your plants in close proximity while allowing air movement through correctly spaced plants.

Watering habits may mean success or failure in orchid growing endeavours. Most orchids in cultivation are epiphytic, growing attached to trees, rocks etc. with their roots exposed to the atmosphere. As such, the root system is able to dry rapidly. Growing orchids attached to trees allows them to grow and dry naturally, so drainage is not a problem. Orchids growing in pots must be allowed to dry their root systems between waterings. It is safer to under water than to over water orchids.

Water plants as often as they become dry. Raise plants off the ground to ensure drainage and air movement. Watering twice a week in summer, once a week in winter is fairly safe system to follow. More orchids are doomed to perish at the hands of humans through over watering than from any other cause.



Orchids will grow and bloom without the use of artificial fertilisers, however, the use of fertilisers may enhance the growth of plants and also flower production. It is recommended that all fertilisers be applied only during the growing season and at one-half the recommended strength. The philosophy is that it is better for plants to receive regular, moderate applications of fertiliser than a monthly overdose which will cause damage to root systems.

Orchids are very gregarious organisms. They like to rub shoulders with their own kind. Orchid growing is a fascinating interest for the home gardener. Fortunately it does not involve heavy pick and shovel work associated with other areas of horticulture.

Success is assured provided one follows the basics listed herein. Orchids enjoy good filtered light, application of water as often as they become dry, occasional encouragement with liquid fertiliser and an airy environment where the atmosphere is never stagnant.

By Barry Paget

These notes have been used at our Cultural and New Grower's Meetings. They are from various sources and we thank the authors. All articles are supplied in good faith and the Bribie Island Orchid Society and its members will not be held responsible for any loss or damage.