

Orchid Growing in Orange County California

By Tony Glinskas and Roberta Fox

We enjoy a wonderful climate here in Orange County. The combination of latitude and proximity to the ocean and mountains permits us to enjoy ideal temperatures year around. This environment is not only great for us, but for many orchids.

Many people think that orchids only grow in hot, humid, dense jungles. Although many orchids do live in the tropical rain forests, there are over 30,000 different types of orchids. They are the largest family of flowering plants on earth, and orchids can be found on all continents. Some are difficult to grow in this area without a greenhouse. However, many types of orchids will thrive in our local climate. These are the orchids that will be the topic of our discussion today. We will discuss the "easy to grow and bloom" orchids for our area.

Orchids as houseplants: Orchids are generally not houseplants, except when we bring them into our living area to enjoy while they are blooming. Most orchids require more light, humidity, and temperature variation than we normally have in our homes. Two orchids that do make excellent houseplants are Phalaenopsis ("moth orchid"), and certain types of Paphiopedilum ("slipper orchid"). Both require relatively low light, and we can easily increase the humidity around them to approximate the levels that they need. While not needing bright light, they need adequate duration of light (12 hours per day or more) to bloom. Artificial light to "extend the day" for them facilitates growing and blooming these orchids indoors.

Cymbidium: These are easiest orchids to grow outdoors in our area. Light: They require very bright direct light for best blooming. Near the coast, you can grow them in full sun. Inland, growers will need to provide some shade during the hottest days of summer. Temperature: Summer temperatures should range around 75-80 degrees F. They can take 100 degree temperatures, but will require some shading, more humidity, and increased air circulation. Winter temperatures as low as 28 degrees for a few hours will not harm the plant, but bud damage can occur below 40 degrees. It is critical that they receive a daily temperature variation of about 25 degrees in the late summer or early fall for the initiation of flower spikes. Water: Cymbidiums require ample water during the spring and summer months, and must never dry out.

Masdevallia, Odonotoglossum, and Lycaste: These orchids grow in tropical regions, but at higher elevations where it is cooler, but humid. These orchids are suited for areas along the coast or cooler spots in your garden. They are not happy when the temperatures go above 80 degrees for extended periods (extra moisture and air movement helps them make it through the summer) but can handle nighttime temperatures in the 30's.

Vanda: These orchids are tropical plants, but can do very well locally if we give them lots of light, humidity, and fertilizer, and protect them from cold. They tolerate high temperatures well. When exposed to temperatures below 45 degrees, they often get black spots on their leaves. The spots are not harmful to the plant, but do detract from their appearance. Some varieties are more forgiving of cold than others – when purchasing one, ask the seller about its temperature tolerance.

Laelia: Many Laelias (the most popular is Laelia anceps) come from the high mountains of northern Mexico. They thrive on high light, tolerate a temperature range from the 90's down to the 30's, and require little moisture. If a hybrid has "L" in its name (Blc, Slc.), it is likely to be temperature-tolerant as well.

Oncidium, Epidendrum, Dendrobium: These orchids grow very well in this area with a minimum of care. They require high light and like to dry out between waterings. Cattleya hybrids also fit into this category, but prefer slightly less light. They can take a wide range of temperatures, but prefer 60-80 degrees. The Noble type of Dendrobium can take temperatures in the 30's as long as it is kept dry. The Phalaenopsis type of Dendrobium doesn't like temperatures below 60 degrees.

Paphiopedilums: There many different types of "Paph" or "Lady Slipper" orchids. In general, the solid green-leaved types are cool growers and require shade and little fertilizer. The "mottled" or light green-leaved types require warmer temperatures and more light. Both require constant moisture.

General Overview:

Water: Most orchids are "epiphytes" or air plants. They require moisture but don't want to sit in water or have soggy media. Water must drain freely through the medium and then be permitted to dry a bit before the next watering. Most orchids need to be potted in an open medium (such as bark or coconut chips or stones... NEVER soil) so that the roots will always get plenty of air circulation. If the leaves feel limp, this usually means that the plant is not getting enough moisture. However, it could also be due to rotted roots from too much water. Before increasing the water, take the plant out of the pot and inspect the roots. Pull off any rotted roots and repot in clean new media.

Light: This depends heavily on the type of orchid you are growing. Generally, the leaves should be slightly yellow-green in color. If the leaves are getting too yellow, decrease the amount of sunlight. If they are deep green, gradually increase the light. Rapid increase of light can cause sunburn, and will increase the stress on your plant, make it more susceptible to diseases and insects.

Fertilizer: Think of fertilizer as “vitamins” rather than “food”. Plants get their food from photosynthesis, in the presence of water, air, and sunshine. They do not get anything else in nature except for some decaying organic material, or “presents” from an occasional bird or animal. However, some extra “vitamins” will provide some necessary trace minerals. The very expensive “magic potions” and “complex” fertilizers are usually not worth the prices. Many studies have shown that fertilizers are pretty much the same. Get any balanced (16-16-16) fertilizer from your local home-supply store. A low concentration applied regularly is much better than a hearty dose at any time. Use $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{1}{4}$ the recommended strength. (“Once weekly, weakly” is a good rule). Water your plants first – never feed a dry plant.

Pest Control: The best protection for the plants is frequent inspection. A healthy plant will have strong defenses against pest invasion. The pests go after the “sick” plants and help them to end their misery. When you see a pest, pick it off rather than trying to spray it with poisons. If you must spray, use 70% rubbing alcohol, or soapy water. Since these are non-toxic, you can use them in the house and they will not harm pets or children.

Balance is the vital goal. If the temperature or light are increased, so must the air circulation, water, and fertilizer. When light levels and temperatures drop, reduce water and fertilizer.

The above list is a general overview and is by no means all-inclusive. Cross-breeding can lead to great complication in understanding the needs of the orchid. There are many variables, and a wide range of habitats in which orchids grow, which make it impossible to address the specific needs of each one in a brief summary. The plant label will help you seek information about a specific plant on the Internet, or in a good orchid book. The natural habitat of the plant will help to identify the conditions under which it will thrive. However, orchids are extremely adaptable, and often adjust to different environments if they are acclimated gently. When you purchase an orchid, ask the grower how they were caring for the plant. (Outside? In a greenhouse?) Inspect your plants often. If they are doing well, continue what you were doing. If not, consider making some changes, but gradually. Above all, go to a local orchid society meeting or an orchid show. Check your newspaper, or go to <http://fascinationoforchids.com/clubs.html> to find a list of most of the orchid groups in Southern California. These are places where you can meet other “orchid people” with whom you can discuss your plants and learn how others are growing theirs in our local area.

There is a wealth of orchid information on the Internet. Go to <http://fascinationoforchids.com/links.html> . Check out <http://orchidcentral.net> to learn what works for one hobbyist in Costa Mesa.