

Growing Orchids in Your Home

With proper plant selection, most of us can successfully grow and bloom orchids in our homes. The common belief that orchids grow only in hot and humid tropical environments is the stuff of legends and mythology.

There are thought to be over 30,000 species of orchids many of which are truly tropical, but many are also found growing in deserts, high in mountains covered by snow in winter, and even 8 species known to grow wild in San Luis Obispo County.

To successfully grow an orchid in your home, you need to select plants that will thrive in your home's environment. Fortunately many orchids find the stable and temperate conditions in a typical home to be ideal growing conditions.



Figure 1 - Phalaenopsis

I recommend that novice orchid growers start with one or more of the following three orchid genera: Phalaenopsis, Paphiopedilum, and Dendrobiums. All three of these orchid types are readily available and reasonably inexpensive. They can be purchased in bloom at many markets, nurseries, and Home&Garden stores. Properly cared for, these orchids will grow and bloom year after year, providing the grower with wonderful sprays of blossoms that can last for many months on the plant.

Phalaenopsis, sometimes referred to as "Moth Orchids", and Paphiopedilums "Lady Slippers", both require minimal direct sunlight and thrive in typical household temperatures of between 60°F and 85°F. They need bright indirect light, but will tolerate direct early morning sun.

Both of these orchid varieties are easy to bloom, with long lasting flowers. Some varieties bloom sporadically throughout the year, providing opportunities to have something in bloom year around. The hybrids are generally fragrance free, which can be a plus for those with allergies.



Figure 2 - Paphiopedilum 'Empire'

Phalaenopsis are epiphytes, with large fleshy air roots, found growing up in the forest canopy, wrapping their roots around the tree. Paphiopedilums are typically terrestrial, growing in open soils of loose organic matter, usually in marshy areas where the soil remains damp, but not wet.

Dendrobiums require more direct sunlight to successfully bloom. They thrive in full early morning sunlight, but you should not expose them to full midday or early afternoon sunlight as they will sunburn. I grow my Dendrobiums in a south-facing window, with a shade that blocks about 50% of the sunlight. We leave the shade open in the morning and late afternoon. They bloom once a year, but for an extended period of time.

Dendrobiums are also epiphytic or lithophytic (grow on rocks). They need an open potting medium to provide good airflow to their roots. Pot using medium fir bark with added perlite and sphagnum moss.

Properly potted, all these plants generally require watering only once a week under temperate home conditions. They should be watered, "Weekly/Weakly". Once a week with a weak fertilizer solution, 1/2 of the manufacturer's recommendation. Water thoroughly, allowing all the water to pass through and out the bottom of the pot. Never allow an orchid to sit in standing water. Orchid fertilizers are available at many garden centers.



Figure 3 - Dendrobium 'Diamond Queen'

All orchids need to be repotted about every two to three years. This prevents the potting material from breaking down excessively, denying air to the roots, which can lead to root rot and plant death. Repotting also removes much of the salts that build up in the potting mix from fertilizers and your local water supply.

The type of potting mix depends upon the plant. Generally the larger the roots, the more porous the potting medium. Epiphytes want their roots exposed to air where they can dry between watering. This means a potting medium consisting primarily of large bark chips. Terrestrial orchids want loose fluffy soils in which to spread their roots, so a smaller mix is used to pot Paphiopedilums.

With the appropriate selection of orchid plants, basic guidelines for sunlight, watering and feeding requirements anyone can successfully grow and bloom orchids in their home. It's very rewarding to have these lovely blooming plants in your home year after year and you will derive significant satisfaction from knowing that you personally bloomed your plants.

To learn more about orchids and how to grow them yourself, join a local orchid society where you can learn from other orchid enthusiasts.

Five Cities Orchid Society meets the 2nd Thursday of each month at 7:30PM in the Arroyo Grande Woman's Club, 211 Vernon Ave., Arroyo Grande. For more information about Five Cities Orchid Society, local orchid meetings and events visit our web site on the Internet: <http://www.fcos.org>

Attend the Annual Central Coast Orchid Show & Sale in March held at the South County Regional Center, 800 W. Branch, Arroyo Grande. There will be a plant doctor there to answer questions, cultural information sheets on growing many orchid varieties and potting demonstrations, and numerous orchid nurseries selling a large variety of orchids.

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For a variety of beautiful orchid photographs, visit Greg's web site at:
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