Master Gardener Newspaper Articles

Volunteer Program

Tulare/Kings Counties

Growing Orchids at Home

by Jeanne Rose, UC Master Gardener

More than 25,000 species of orchids are known to exist, and some botanists believe that more are still to be discovered. There two main types in cultivation are the terrestrials and the epiphytes. The terrestrials live naturally in the rich soil and decaying matter of the forest floor; the epiphytes, in their native habitat, attach themselves to branches and bark high above the ground where they get more sunlight.

One of the best choices for the beginner at orchid culture is the Phalaenopsis, or moth orchid. This epiphyte is widely available in a variety of colors and sizes. The showy, colorful blooms of Phalaenopsis orchids can last for weeks, and no special lights are needed to keep the plants happy. East, west, or shaded south windows out of direct sunlight are ideal locations for epiphytes. North-facing windows are not good locations for any orchids. They will do well in a soilless mix of materials such as bark, charcoal and sphagnum moss. Specialty orchid potting mixes are available in garden centers, specialty stores and home stores where orchids are sold. These materials provide good aeration and they drain easily. Watering the plants every four to seven days is usually adequate.

I learned how to care for Phalaenopsis by trial and error. I couldn't keep the first one alive; later ones lived but didn't get any new growth and didn't rebloom. One poor little plant languished in a north window for a couple of years until after I moved one of the newer plants into a curtained south-facing window and, within day, it started two off-shoots, or keikis (Haiwaiian for children) on the bloom stalks. Then I moved the poor, pitiful specimen from the north window into the south-facing window. Within three weeks, a new leaf began to appear. Since then other plants have come to live in the same south window where they seem happy; some are even developing buds for rebloom!

Experts advise that orchids do best in the same temperatures in which people are most comfortable - night temperatures between 60-65°F and day temperatures between 70-85°F. A few degrees either way won't present a problem.

The Cattleya, or corsage orchid, is another good epiphyte choice for the beginner; however, watering them is a little trickier than for Phalaenopsis. Cattleya potting mix must dry out completely between waterings. Cattleyas must be kept out of cold rooms and drafts when they are blooming. These orchids also come in various colors and sizes.

Paphiopedilums, or lady's slipper orchids, are a little more difficult to find. These terrestrial orchids are appreciated for long-lived blooms with slipper-like pouches. They need sufficient light to grow and bloom but will burn if given direct sunlight. The potting mix should not get completely dry between waterings. "Paphs" are sensitive to salt, so the water must run freely through the potting mix and drain completely. Temperature requirements are the same as for the "Phals" and Cattleyas.

The Dendrobium family of epiphytes consists of more than 1500 species, most of which are definitely not for beginners. Some retailers, however, sell the novice-friendly hybrids, D. Phalaenopsis and D. Nobile. Be sure to check the plant's label to ensure you know which species you are buying. They prefer the same light conditions as the above-mentioned orchids, and temperature requirements are only slightly different. They like the same difference between day and night temperatures as the others but will tolerate, and even benefit from, daytime temperatures as high as 95-110 degrees Fahrenheit. The potting mix should dry almost completely between waterings.

Once you become acquainted with the light, water and temperature needs of your orchids, you may need to consider some other factors necessary to keep your orchid plants happy and healthy.

Humidity - Orchids do best in humidity of 40-70 percent. To raise humidity around them, group them on a tray filled with pebbles and water, keeping the water level just below the top of the pebbles so the pots won't get saturated.

Fertilizer - Most orchid potting mixes contain little or no fertilizer; you will need to fertilize your orchid plants regularly. The type of fertilizer used is dependent upon the potting material. Orchids potted in bark need more fertilizer than those growing in soil. Usually 10-10-10 fertilizer is good for terrestrial orchids and 15-15-5 for epiphytes. Fertilize every week at one-quarter the strength recommended on the product label.

Repotting - Orchids should be repotted every year or every two years, usually in spring when new, green tips appear on the normally white roots. This is easy to see on the epiphytes; however, you may need to probe gently to check for new growth on the roots of terrestrials.

Perhaps these tips will help you enjoy growing orchids in your own home.

February 7, 2008