



St. Augustine Orchid Society

www.staugorchidsociety.org

Humidity – Too Little or Too Much

July 2013

by Dr. Courtney Hackney, hackneau@comcast.net

Just for fun, I took a look at some of the old “Tips” columns for July and found a common theme: heat and humidity. One might think that given the fact that most horticultural orchids come from tropical environments, summer’s heat and humidity would be an ideal time for orchids. While that is true for some orchids, such as strap-leaved vandas and many encyclias, species from the tropical environs and their hybrids often struggle this time of year because many of them come from higher elevations where temperatures do not reach levels found in our green-houses or yards.

In addition, the large number of growers who grow under lights or windowsills must contend with family members who “insist” on air conditioning the indoor environment. This produces an ideal temperature for humans, but reduces humidity to levels that cause most orchids to dry out when they should be producing luxurious new growths or leaves.



It is usually obvious from the questions that arrive at the “Tips” email this time of year where a grower has their orchids. “My phal was growing well with flowers, but they dried up and my leaves are shriveling, the lower ones turning yellow. What do I do?” is a common question and suggests that the orchid is growing indoors. The solution is to provide more humidity. While this is a good solution, often the hobbyist has already succeeded in killing the phal roots because their response to flower drop was to water more frequently. Typically, the orchid is in sphagnum that now holds only dead roots. Can the orchid be saved? Yes, but only if repotted and kept under ideal conditions for some time. If this is a “Big Box” pot plant-type phal, my suggestion is to discard it and get a new one in flower and provide a new location with better humidity this time.



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The other scenario I get sounds much the same, but the description usually mentions leaves turning black or mushy indicating that this plant is almost certainly being grown outdoors where it receives lots of rain from afternoon showers followed by high temperatures, an ideal environment for bacterial rots.

If you have experienced one of these scenarios be assured that many of us have had this experience, but are now able to grow great orchids despite a few missteps in the beginning. Remember that commercial nurseries grow under many different conditions, but each had to learn what worked for them, just as every new grower must. They also have the luxury of access to many kinds of pest and disease control products that a new grower may not have. There are some hybrids and species that are almost impossible to grow in hot humid climates without such products.

The advice to understand your new orchid's natural habitat if you want to grow it well works for species, but may not for hybrids. Plant labels are often missing for many pot plants or the abbreviations impossible to interpret for a new hobbyist. Even an experienced grower would find it difficult to guess what conditions a Vuyl. (Vuylstekeara = *Miltonia* x *Cochloida* x *Odontoglossum*), requires since there are so many different species that could be in the background. When I am asked about growing complex hybrids such as a Vuylstekeara, I tell the novice to grow it like a cattleya, since the goal of those generating pot plants is to produce an orchid that grows easily in a variety of conditions.