

TIPS FOR BETTER GROWING AND HAPPIER ORCHIDS

by Keith Davis, dowiana51@gmail.com

BASICS:

Light. Give the most that the plant can take without damage or detriment. In the greenhouse or home, use the different micro-environments to your advantage. Healthy plants that don't bloom or don't bloom well almost always lack enough light.

Water. Less than 300 ppm TDS is best and pH of 5.5 to 6.5. Have your water tested. The OS can get instruments so that all the members can test the basics. Water management can become complicated so get help. Good water is critical for good orchids, nothing will substitute for it.

Air. The orchid environment should feel "fresh", never stuffy or muggy. Working this out is important. Every growing situation is different. Poor air movement/quality = lots of problems.

Food. Try different things to see what works for you. Your water and mix will dictate to some degree what kinds to use. I use low dose (1/4 tea./gallon) at every watering just like nature does. Orchids are very efficient at taking up small amounts of nutrients. Choose one that has a higher % of NITRATE as this is the only form of nitrogen that plants can use directly. Other forms must be converted by microbial action and these forms usually get leached out of the mix before that happens. People are finding that orchids don't need as much phosphorus as once thought.

Pests. Pay attention to your plants and let them talk to you. Catch pest problems early before they become a major issue that is difficult to control. Get help if you need it. Always check new arrivals for pests or other problems.

Mix. No single mix is going to work for everyone or for every plant. Experiment with small samples. NEVER change over your whole collection to something new at one time. Do some research as to what your plant's needs are for a mix or growing surface to be mounted on.

TIPS:

Virus & disease prevention. Sterilize everything that comes into contact with your plants, clippers, rhizome clips, pot hangers, pots, reused mix. Use a fresh newspaper to cover the area where you work on your plant. Keep pests at bay. Use BanRot, cinnamon, or similar on a fresh rhizome cut. Also, use a HOT clipper to make the cut as this will kill spores as it cuts through, where a cold sterile razor just pushes spores into the cut. If a plant is not rare or of high value and tests positive for virus, it is best to get rid of it. Agdia Inc. (1-800-622-4342, www.agdia.com) sells an excellent virus testing kit for orchids that you can do at home.

No slip hangers for plastic pots. Heat hanger "elbow" just enough to melt the plastic and then immediately cool with water. Bend elbow in with pliers if needed. For very heavy and large pots, you can use two hangers at opposite angles.

Hanger tension adjustment. Push tension arm in and push from side to side at the same time.

Rhizome clips. Plastic, clay pot, large plant with bamboo stake. Good plastic pot clips available from HICKS ORCHID SUPPLIES 407-493-3064, 407-256-8518, 407-277-0430 or from Tropical Plant Products 407-293-2451 who can get them from Hicks.

Labels/tags. Many places have them, but I like NATIONAL BAND AND TAG CO. 859-261-2035. You can still write on them with a pencil. Nice catalog available. order the "virgin vinyl".

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Writing on labels. Most permanent is pencil if the label is not too slick. Best is an art pencil, 2B. If you have the slick labels, the only permanent thing I have found is the SHARPIE PEEL-OFF CHINA MARKER from art supply places. Best black marker such as for the top label on your hanger is SHARPIE RUB-A-DUB LAUNDRY MARKER.

ID tag on top of hanger. If you have a large collection, putting an ID tag on top of the pot's hanger is a good way to make sure you don't lose track of the plant. I do this with all my most valuable plants. Only a key word or initial is needed most of the time.

Bagging back-bulbs. Back-bulbs from valuable plants can often be coaxed onto putting out a new growth and roots by bagging. I use the long clear bags that the newspaper comes in. Make sure there are 2 drain holes in the bottom and one small hole near the top. Do not place in direct sun...under the edge of a bench is ok.

Sharing. Share divisions of your best things for security. If you grow long enough, you will have a loss and regret not sharing your best things with friends, but then it will be too late.

Disasters...minimize them. Have an automatic back up generator, have warning system such as Sensaphone or at least a wireless remote thermometer that triggers a signal if too hot or too cold. Always have 2 heaters and two fans. NEVER have both units on the same wiring system or the same circuit breaker. Never have both systems run by the same thermostat or computer. Everything mechanical WILL fail in time, so always have a backup. Keep an extra thermostat and extra belt and know how to replace them...practice this.

How to save aerial roots when repotting or dividing. All aerial roots will die if placed in a pot and covered with mix. Save them by placing in an empty pot, wait till new branching/tips show, then cover little by little over a few weeks...all the roots will live.

Stimulate new front lead roots to grow faster and protect from pests. Cover the newest roots at the front lead with sphagnum moss...this will keep pests off and stimulate them to grow faster down into the mix. This will also prevent new green tips from drying out and stop growing. The slightly higher moisture around the roots keeps green tips long and greatly speeds growth down into the mix.

No-stress division. Some plants are very difficult and too valuable to risk just cutting a division...use this over-the pot method as shown and you will never stress the division or mother plant.

Protecting rot-sensitive new growths. Many plants have a new growth that can hold water down in it such as C. bowringiana and its hybrids. If conditions are right, the new growth will rot. Cover the new growth with a clear plastic cap till it gets larger and the "cup" disappears.

Clothespin etiquette. One way to straighten or reposition buds that are not cooperative to make you look good as a grower. Plant shown is Blc. Mary Alice Underwood 'Krull Smith' HCC-AOS. You will need several pins with different size holes. Always sterilize between using on different plants....place in a bowl of 25% bleach for 2 hours, rinse well.

Forcing more growths per season. Most orchids are short/long-day sensitive and this can be used to force more growths per season. In this photo of Bc. Hartland 'FCC', I received this plant in May of 2011 with the 7 smallest back bulbs. This photo was taken in December of 2012 and the plant then had 11 growths. It now has 12 growths. In 2 years, it has produced 5 new growths whereas under normal circumstances, it would produce only 2. When a new growth is mature, do the following: If long days...expose plant to only 8 hours of light for 2-3 weeks, then back to long days and a new eye will start to swell. If short days, place under bright lights (HID if possible) for 14 hours per day for 3-4 weeks till new eye swells. This will work even if the plant is carrying a pod which normally inhibits new growths.