



St. Augustine Orchid Society

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What's Wrong with My Orchid

January 2004

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[Orchid Growing Tips](#)

There is an old joke among seasoned orchid hobbyists that the best growers are the ones that have killed the most orchids. It is also obvious that those that grow orchids as a hobby are also extremely persistent and do not accept failure. Most people that acquire an orchid or two give up when their orchid does not grow and bloom right away. A plant that does not grow and flower when placed on a windowsill, however, likely challenges those reading this column.

Each time I visit a hobbyist, both new and experienced, there are always a few plants brought out with a request of "what is wrong with this plant". Occasionally, the answer is obvious when scale or mealybugs can be seen under leaves. Most of the time, however, my answer is a best guess based upon what the plant is telling me. Limp leaves on a phal suggest that there is a problem related to water. Mushy media with the plant say that the plant has lost its roots. Crusty deposits of salt on the surface of dry media tell the story of too little water or water containing high levels of solids in the water. More than half of the plants presented to me fall into one of these categories.

Often such plants were purchased from the plant sections of large stores, but such plants also come from orchid nurseries as well. Many times I am told that the ailing orchid was growing among many others that were prospering while this one was not. How can this be, is the usual admonition.

All orchid plants are not created equal. Some grow and flower better than others under similar conditions. Experienced growers often forget that they sold or traded some of their first orchid acquisitions; plants that grew well, but were less than ideal when it came to flower quality.

Mericlones or hybrids from proven parents generally replace those discarded plants. The fact that these new plants did not prosper under the same conditions confuses the orchid hobbyist. Commercial growers have known this for many years and solve the dilemma by discarding plants growing poorly under their conditions. Even chance tetraploid phal seedlings may be discarded because they grow more slowly. It is difficult to watch dozens of orchid seedlings being thrown into a garbage can. The nurturing gene in most orchid hobbyists is alive and well and wants to save every single orchid plant. Save your growing space for orchids that grow well under your conditions. Do not be afraid of trying new types of orchids, but be willing to throw away failures.

Well-grown orchid plants have a sort of momentum, an excess of energy when the plant is storing more sunlight and nutrients than it is using. A new plant in this condition placed in your growing area has energy to allow it to adapt to its new conditions or to flower. Once an orchid has flowered some of that momentum is lost. The same loss of momentum occurs when an orchid is repotted, moved into new growing conditions, is attacked by scale, etc. It may take many years to get that momentum back into a plant once it is lost. Diseases, especially viruses, use a plant's resources and prevent it from growing as fast as it might. Such plants may never regain their momentum, but will linger for many years taking both space and your time.



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Many mericlones available in the market today harbor such viruses, but do not show any signs. As soon as the plant flowers or is moved into less than ideal conditions, the momentum is lost and the virus catches up. Suddenly, such plants grow more slowly and show virus symptoms where none existed before.

Orchids that grow poorly challenge hobbyists. Indeed, the purchase of hard-to grow species and hybrids is what keeps orchidists fascinated by the hobby. As you learn about each type of orchid do not be afraid of discarding a clone that has ceased to be vigorous. You may be able to bring it back in a couple of years, but it is easier to get a new plant and begin again using the knowledge gained on the last one. That is what makes a good orchid grower.