

# Phalaenopsis Orchids

## A Springtime Favorite

*If you are new to the orchid hobby, your first plants are likely Phalaenopsis. The moth orchid has become the darling of the commercial pot plant market for orchids. And for good reason: they grow well in normal household conditions. If you have a "Phal" or two in bloom now, they have probably been in flower for quite some time. Soon, you should cut off the flower spike and repot the orchid. We offer the following tips written by Mary Noble McQuerry.*

**The** important thing about growing any plant is to understand its structure and its habits. A phalaenopsis plant is attractive, it has fleshy leaves that are more or less oval in shape, arranged in an alternate pattern around a central stem. If the plant is healthy, the foliage is turgid but gracefully arched as in this photo.



### How the plant grows

Phalaenopsis are monopodials which means they have one central stem that grows upwards as opposed to a cattleya which makes repetitious sideways oriented growths. Phalaenopsis have no pseudobulbs for the storage of water and nutrients although the succulent leaves and the thick roots both have some storage capabilities. These plants have no dormant period because they have insufficient storage to sustain them. Therefore, they need generally consistent treatment and conditions throughout the year.

### What do Phalaenopsis want?

Since most species of phalaenopsis come from warm climates, they need to be grown warm. A range of 65-85 degrees F is optimal. Safe

night time temperatures probably are best above 60 degrees although lower night temperatures, 55 degrees for 3 to 4 weeks, help initiate the flower spikes. What seems to be essential is a drop in temperature between night and day. Any temperature changes should be gradual as the plants do not like cold drafts, cold water, wet feet or wet foliage in cold weather. These suggested temperatures are approximate. A few degrees more or less are acceptable. Low temperatures or sudden changes may damage flowers or buds.

Adequate light is important to produce strong plants which will in turn produce strong flower spikes with the maximum amount of blooms. If growing conditions are too shady plant tissue may be limp and soft. Ideally the leaves should be crisp and self-supporting. The plants may not bloom in insufficient light or bloom poorly with short-lived flowers.

On the other hand, if light is too bright and water, temperature, humidity and fertilizer not in balance, the foliage may be hard and stunted. If light is bright but humidity is low, leaves may shrivel from dehydration.

Watch your plants to determine their needs. As long as the foliage is growing and is crisp and sturdy, the environment is probably right. Too much direct sun will scorch leaves and burn them in spots which destroys plant cells and leaves an unsightly detracting wound.

Daily watering of mature plants is seldom necessary unless the sun is very bright, the temperature high and the air dry. The clue is to water plants thoroughly, let them dry out somewhat but never completely. It's best to water early in the day so that the plant dries off before the temperature drops at night. A lot depends on the type and condition of the potting material. If it is soft and retains water, less frequent applications are necessary than if it is porous and drains rapidly. Phalaenopsis roots need moisture almost all of the time but soggy compost excludes air and roots need air to function and thrive.

When you water your plants, do it thoroughly so water runs through the pot and out the bottom. Pouring a little water on the surface does nothing for the roots below. Take your plants to the kitchen sink and pour on water so that it runs out the drainage holes. If you are uncertain whether or not a plant needs water, insert your finger as far down as possible into the pot. If the medium feels damp, wait a day or two to water. Remember to use water that is neither too hot nor too cold.

Do not let water stand in the crown of your plant. This causes rot that kills plants.

If your home environment is very dry it helps to place your potted plant on a dish or tray filled with pebbles that are almost covered with water. This will help raise the humidity sufficiently to keep your plant from drying out rapidly. Remember that humidity is water vapor in the air and has nothing to do with water in the pot.

The kind and amount of fertilizer you choose depends on all the other factors of the environment and the type of potting medium. A good general rule is to use a balanced fertilizer (20-20-20), diluted to half strength or less and applied every other week. If your plants are potted in bark choose a 30-10-10 formula.



### Houseplants

Phalaenopsis make very good house plants because they can exist in reasonable light conditions. A well grown plant can produce flowers that will last for months. It is not unheard of for Phalaenopsis flowers to last 3, 4 or even 5 months. Is it any wonder that they have surpassed azaleas and chrysanthemums as our favorite pot plant?



Always rewarding, Phalaenopsis hybrids are available in a wide array of colors and patterns.

Excerpted from *You Can Grow Phalaenopsis Orchids* by Mary Noble, © The American Orchid Society