

# December in Your Orchid Collection



**V. Arjuna 'Illumined' AM/AOS**

## December Climate Data

Average high: 77.5

Average low: 62.2

Average mean: 69.9

Average rainfall: 2.18"

December marks the beginning of the serious dry season in South Florida. While this additional dryness provides relief from the autumnal rains that can bring so many fungal problems, December is also the month of shortest day lengths. This contracted period of light, on the contrary, reduces severely the drying potential for our plants. Nature thus both gives and takes away from us in December. We must make sure, therefore, that we do not aid the dark side of the force by improper watering. In December, above all, one must stick strictly to the two cardinal principles of orchid watering: water early in the day so your plants have as many hours as possible to dry, and water heavily when you water, allowing longer intervals between watering to dry plants thoroughly. This practice maximizes the benefit of the drier air of December and

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minimizes the adverse effect of the shorter day lengths.

When nature has delivered a light overnight or early morning rain as she so often does in December at the leading edge of a cold front, add to her efforts by watering thoroughly that same morning and skip out watering for an extra several days afterward. With this method you can use the general dryness of December to give yourself much of the advantage of a greenhouse in terms of controlling watering. As in all aspects of orchid culture, keen observation is the key to success. In cooler weather your plants need much less water. Moreover cool air even at the same relative humidity strips less water from your plants because cool air has less water holding capability. Always be sure that your plants really need water before you roll out the hose in December. Remember to use at least one of the standard tests for dryness: the finger dug slightly into the media test or the newly sharpened pencil coming dry like a knife from a well cooked custard, or test by hefting a pot that you know the weight of, both wet and dry and be sure that it has attained sufficient lightness. When you are sure they are dry, water them until you are sure they are very wet, then let the drying air of December do its magic to ward off leaf spotting diseases.

Himalayan dendrobiums of the nobile and Callista (*D. aggregatum*, *chrysotoxum*, etc.) Sections require no additional water (beyond rain) in December. Remember, those of you who water (or, even worse, fertilize) these dendrobiums in December, will be punished by having your flowers taken away in the spring. Some growers, who have the space, isolate these dendrobiums along with other types that want hard drying such as *Catasetum*, *Cycnoches*, *Mormodes*, and *Calanthe*. Another strategy is to hang these plants high or at the edges of the collection reminding oneself to neglect them and also to avoid watering them by mistake. Some growers achieve the same result effect by turning the pots of these genera on their side in November or December, to avoid catching water from whatever source. Plants of some of these genera that have finished flowering can even be removed from their pots and stripped to bare roots in anticipation of re-potting them in new media when they break growth in the spring.

Most sympodial orchids are resting in December and require less fertilizer. Biweekly or even monthly applications of a balanced fertilizer or 15-5-15 are still desirable. Nitrate nitrogen is the most readily absorbed in cooler weather; therefore at least one more application of the potassium nitrate/magnesium sulfate (at 1 tbs. each per gal.) recommended in November is still a good idea. It's good stuff! *Vandas*, *Phalaenopsis* and other monopodial orchids should be fertilized right through the winter although both the amount of fertilizer and the frequency of application can be reduced. Remember reddening of the foliage is not natural, nor is it a response to the cold per se but rather a symptom of nutritional deficiency. The plants are asking for more potassium and magnesium. Give them the groceries.

December can be cold. Frost has occurred in the first week of the month and unforgettably, the coldest temperatures ever recorded in South Florida were registered on December 25, 1989. If you haven't taken some of the precautions outlined in the November Newsletter, get busy! Keep a close eye on the forecasts during this volatile month.

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Remember that hard cane dendrobiums of the sections Spathulata and Phalaenanthe are the most sensitive of commonly cultivated orchids. They resent temperature much below 60 degrees F. Phalaenopsis are next most sensitive, then vandas. Protect all these genera more carefully.

If you are getting a jump on Spring potting chores by repotting sympodial orchids that have finished blooming, it is particularly important that you take extra care in securing them in their containers. These plants may not be sending out new roots for several months, enough time for them to be shaken loose from insufficient staking. Passing cold fronts can bring brisk winds in December. When new roots start to form on insufficiently secured plants, wind moves the plant and chafes the new root tips off. Improperly secured plants are never able to root properly and slowly pine away. If you love them you must tie them up, tie them down. This is also especially true of mass produced orchids sold in Home Depot, K Mart etc. The soft, peat based media used to grow these commercially produced plants in the controlled environment of a greenhouse often does not provide sufficient purchase to secure the plants in the rough and tumble of a South Florida orchid collection buffeted by harsh winter winds. You probably should have already re-potted these into more durable medium but until you do, tie 'em up!

Keep those vandas, phalaenopsis and hard cane dendrobiums as warm as you can. Merry Christmas, Hanukkah, and Kwanza!

## Tasks for December

- Water judiciously and well
- Protect cold sensitive genera
- Provide extra potassium and magnesium
- Repot flowered out plants- be sure they are secure
- Buy holiday presents for all your orchid friends- suggestions: *Fla. Orchid Growing Month by Month* (The acclaimed Florida specific guide to great growing) \$22.50 post paid and signed or *Orchid Territory* (The hilarious best-selling novel on the Florida orchid scene) \$17.50 post paid and signed. Or December special both for \$30.00! Checks or money orders to Redland Press 25000 Farmlife Rd., Redland, Florida 33031. Phone 305 247-4398 or [vandas@mindspring.com](mailto:vandas@mindspring.com).