

Orchids light up your home or office with a burst of exotic beauty from the tropics. The flowers come in fascinating shapes and vivid colors, and they open on arching branches that dramatically display them. Some orchids bloom with more than 6 at a time and in the right conditions may bloom more than once a year. You can start with one of the easy-to-care-for varieties and add more challenging types as you gain experience.

Beginner's Picks

If you've never cared for an orchid before, choose one of these three. They're the least-demanding types, while also offering you many different shapes and colors to select from.

Lady's slippers (*Paphiopedilum*, commonly referred to as "paphs") bear flowers with pouch-like throats surrounded by bigger petals that may be patterned or speckled. The color options include shades of pink, reds, green, and white.

Cattleya orchids have tubular centers with frilly petals, typically in purple, pink, and yellow hues. They have the widest temperature and humidity tolerance of these three and the shortest bloom time.

Moth orchids (*Phalaenopsis*) have clusters of flower petals that look a bit like butterflies. The colors may be pink, purple, orange, yellow or white, and in various combinations and patterns.

Buying Tips

You can pick up orchids in supermarkets, florist shops, and garden centers, but the best place to buy one is at a sale hosted by a local orchid society, such as the **Southeastern Pennsylvania Orchid Society** (sepos.org). You are sure to get plants that have been properly cared for, as well as help in choosing the best species for your conditions and helpful growing advice.

Wherever you buy an orchid, check to be sure the stems are slightly leathery, strong, and fairly erect. Different orchids produce different leaf shapes and textures, but all healthy orchid leaves and stems should be green, with no yellow marks or dark blemishes. Take a peek at the roots, too. They should be light green if they are dry and dark green when they are wet, and plump rather than white and shriveled.

Healthy Conditions

Light. In their native tropical environment, orchids get about 12 hours of sunlight each day, year-round. Orchids raised indoors fare best in bright, south- or east-facing windows. If you don't have a suitable window location, you can grow them with cool LED lights.

Growing media. Soil or even potting mix are not ideal for orchids. They need air circulating around their roots and water to drain very quickly from their pots. Fir bark nuggets are the most widely used growing media for the common types of orchid, but some growers use sphagnum moss, rock wool, lava rock, or other materials.

Humidity. The ideal humidity level for orchids is 60 to 80 percent, much higher than the 30 percent in most homes during winter. Experienced growers set the pots on trays with gravel or a rubber grid and just enough water so it doesn't touch the plants' roots.

Care And Maintenance

Watering. Orchids tolerate drought much better than they handle excess moisture. An orchid sitting in soggy growing medium will suffocate and die. Check pots once a week and allow the medium to dry out between waterings. Direct the water onto the growing medium (*not the plants' leaves*) and give it a good soaking, then let it dry again. Some media need watering every few days, others every other week.

Feeding. The growing mediums used for orchids have few, if any, nutrients, so regular fertilizing helps them stay vibrant and bloom abundantly. Use a liquid fertilizer formulated for orchids and other indoor blooming plants and follow the package directions carefully for diluting it with water. Excessive fertilizing can burn the plant or promote fungal diseases. Experts recommend feeding orchids every other time you water them, even when it's in bloom.



Care And Maintenance cont.

Repotting. Over time, the growing medium breaks down and can become too dense for orchid roots to absorb oxygen. As the plants grow, the roots may creep out beyond the pot and new growth can unbalance the plant. For all of those reasons, repotting orchids every two to four years keeps them healthy and vigorous. Just be sure to remove them carefully from their current pot so you don't damage the roots.

Small plastic pots are best for orchids. After putting in a base of bark nuggets or other growing medium, set the plant so that the crown (where the stem meets the roots) is just a bit below the top of the pot. Fill in with more growing medium but leave a bit of room from the very top of the pot so that water doesn't spill over the sides.

Many varieties of orchid don't bloom for six months to a year after repotting.

After Bloom

When the flowers on an orchid fade and the petals shrivel or drop, look at the stem on which they bloomed. If it is still green, cut it off about 1 inch above the first node below the lowest flower bloom. The plant may rebloom on a green stem. If the flower spike has turned brown, cut it off where it connects to the plant. At this point, an orchid is dormant, but not dead. It will stay this way for six to nine months. This dormancy stage is a resting period where the plant has time to replenish the resources that were used up during blooming. Continue watering and feeding it during this period.

You can move dormant orchids to a cooler area where the temperatures are **55 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit**, but they need to stay in indirect sunlight even during this resting period. Bring them back to a warm spot when new flower spikes emerge and the plants begin to open their beautiful blossoms again.

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