

# FAQs

## Frequently Asked Questions About Orchids

The American Orchid Society receives hundreds of orchid-related questions each month in a variety of media: phone, fax, e-mail and, yes, even through the mail. Director of Education and Conservation Ned Nash, who answers the majority of these queries, has gathered the most frequently encountered questions here.

### WHERE DO I CUT THE FLOWER SPIKE WHEN IT IS FINISHED?

**The simple answer:** *When most orchids have finished blooming, the spike should be cut off with a sharp, sterile blade as close to the base of the spike as is practical.* Of all of the more commonly available orchids, only phalaenopsis (the moth orchid) will rebloom from its old spike. Phalaenopsis will generally rebloom given a little extra care. The spike should be cut between the scar left by the first flower and the last node (swollen, jointed area on the stem). One of the lower nodes will then initiate a new spike that will generally produce flowers within eight to 12 weeks. Younger or weaker plants may not rebloom. It is also a good idea to cut the spike off entirely by midsummer to allow the plant to grow strongly to produce next year's bloom.

### HOW OFTEN SHOULD I WATER?

**The simple answer:** *Once every four to seven days depending on season and dryness of the home.* Allow the plants to approach dryness, gauged by pot weight or by the pencil trick (the point of a sharpened lead pencil, when inserted into the medium, will darken with moisture if the plant has enough water), and apply

sufficient water so that it drains freely through the container. Never allow any potted plant to sit in its own water.



Flowering plants may require more-frequent waterings to make up for the greater burden of the flowers. Plants will require less water when not in active growth (generally winter months), and more while growing (generally spring and summer months). Increased frequency of watering will not make up for a poor root system. If roots are not plump and alive, repotting may be called for, or the plant may have been recently repotted by the vendor, in which case it will require raised

humidity to compensate for the lack of supporting root uptake. Last, plants with thinner, softer foliage will generally require more water than those with harder, more succulent leaves. Plants with pseudobulbs (such as dendrobiums and cattleyas) generally need to dry out more between waterings than do those without (such as phalaenopsis).

### DO ORCHIDS NEED TO BE FERTILIZED WHILE THEY ARE IN FLOWER? WHAT FERTILIZER SHOULD I USE?

**The simple answer:** *Yes, if anything, flowering plants need extra fertilizer.*

Your plants will need to be fertilized with a product appropriate to the medium in which they are grown. In general, plants in a bark-based mix will need a fertilizer high in nitrogen (usually in a 3-1-1 ratio), while a balanced fertilizer will do for all others (usually a 1-1-1 ratio). If in doubt, fertilize with the same balanced fertilizer you use for your other container plants. Orchids will do far better with too little fertilizer than with too much. The old adage, "feed weakly, weekly" is appropriate. Fertilize every week with a dilute solution.

### WHEN SHOULD I REPOT?

**The simple answer:** *When fresh rooting activity is expected (generally in the spring) or is very evident, generally every one or two years.* Fresh rooting activity is best shown by the succulent green root tips on plump white roots. Often, the main flush of rooting will come from the base

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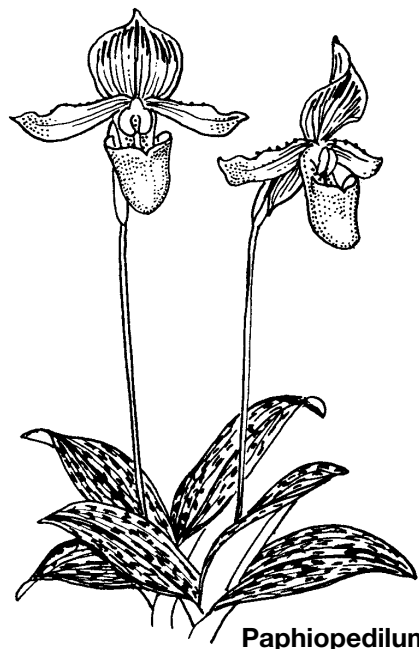
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of the plant (in the case of phalaenopsis), or from the developing newest growth (in the case of dendrobiums and other orchids with pseudobulbs, such as cattleyas). Orchid plants need repotting for one or a combination of two main factors: Potting mix breakdown, often evidenced by dead roots, or the plant outgrowing the container. In the first case, a larger pot may not be required, simply replacement of the growing medium. In the second case, the plant may need dividing or may be shifted into a larger pot. Fresh media should always be used. A good general rule of thumb is to pot for the bottom of the plant, the root system, and not for the top, the foliage. Freshly repotted plants should be placed in a shady, humid area until continued new root growth is observed. In general, if in doubt, pot in the spring.

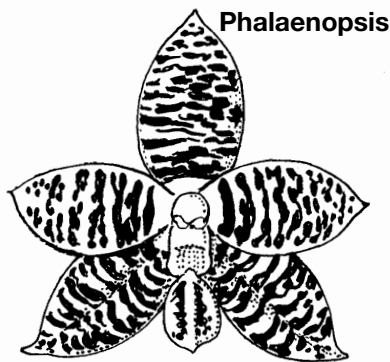
#### WHAT IS THE BEST POTTING MATERIAL?

*The simple answer:* Best is whatever your vendor or source recommends and stocks. Orchids, in general, will grow satisfactorily in many different potting mixes if watering and fertilizing are adjusted appropriately. That is, if the basic requirements for moisture, root aeration and support are accommodated, the most readily available media in your particular area are probably those that have proven to work



**Paphiopedilum**

the best. Orchids are grown today commercially in a variety of media, from fir bark to sphagnum moss to the increasingly popular peat-based mixes best exemplified by Pro-Mix. Watering frequency is generally inversely proportional to the porosity of the medium used. In other words, the faster the mix drains, the more often you'll have to water.



**Phalaenopsis**

#### WHAT IS THE BEST ORCHID FOR GROWING IN THE HOME?

*The simple answer:* One of the most widely available orchids of the mass market types is also the best for the home — the phalaenopsis or moth orchid. Many homes have insufficient light levels for the reflowering of most orchids. However, there are a few orchids that will grow in lower light and will reflower under home-light conditions. Home-light means light provided by a slightly shaded south window, or an east or west window. Phalaenopsis will grow easily under the same conditions enjoyed by African violets. Another good choice, but usually only for those already initiated into orchid appreciation, is *Paphiopedilum* or lady's-slipper orchids. These, like phalaenopsis, have relatively attractive foliage, and will reflower in home conditions giving weeks of floral display. Both need to be kept evenly moist. Do not allow to fully dry out, and fertilize regularly with a weak dilution of any available fertilizer.

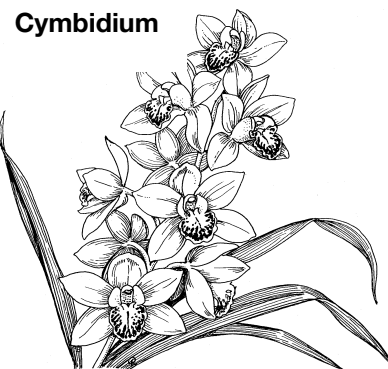
#### MY ORCHID'S LEAVES ARE WRINKLED AND LEATHERY. WHY?

*The simple answer:* Lack of water or dehydration. The next step is to determine why the plant is not getting sufficient water. First, look at the roots. If they appear a healthy white or green and are plump,

and the medium is in good shape, suspect underwatering, especially if the roots are white and the pot is very light. If, on the other hand, the roots are in poor condition, suspect root loss. If the plant has no roots, it cannot take up any water, no matter how much you give it. In this case, the cause may be root loss owing to overwatering or medium deterioration, or a recently repotted and poorly established plant. The immediate solution is to raise humidity in the plants' vicinity to reduce stress on whatever roots there may be, and then deal with whether to repot or to simply wait until the plant establishes in the fresh medium.

#### CAN I GROW ORCHIDS OUTDOORS?

*The simple answer:* Yes. Especially if you live in a frost-free or nearly frost-free area, there is a wide variety of orchids that will grow and flower with light shade outdoors year round. Where winters are cold, orchids can be grown on the patio or



**Cymbidium**

under trees in the warmer months when frost does not threaten. This is often a wonderful solution for orchid growers in colder climates, and enables the plants to grow so much better than they would if left indoors all year. Growers in frost-free areas with cooler summer nights (below 60 F in August and after) can grow cymbidiums, one of the finest of all garden orchids. Where summer nights are warmer, many varieties of vandas and cattleya types are appropriate.

If your questions have not been answered here, read the Beginner's Care Sheets for the five most popular-grown genera included with your New Member Packet.