

Grow Orchids

by Debbie Lauer, Bell County Master Gardener

It happened to me over five years ago. There I was shopping for plants and looking for something different to grow as a house plant. There on the bargain table was this little mesh bag containing a dried up and shriveled looking thing that was labeled as an orange colored orchid. Best of all it was only 50 cents! Well I thought why not? I had reasonable luck with other house plants why not orchids? So I bought it along with some Orchid potting mix, orchid fertilizer, and brought it home. Needless to say I am now hooked on growing orchids and that is the reason for writing this article. I have six plants and three different kinds of orchids, so far. I find myself searching the internet and trying not to buy one of everything.

Now before you think to yourself that orchids need a special greenhouse and lots of extra attention I want to tell you that the exact opposite is true. Of course I found this out the hard way. I dutifully pampered, watered, fertilized, changed potting mix, and put them in larger pots every year. Wanting to have perfect looking plants I even snipped off the wandering roots that often crawl out over the top of the pot! My orchids lived and grew but did not thrive and did not bloom; that is until last year. I must warn you, when the first one blooms for you the orchid habit starts to become addicting!

My husband and I do a lot of RVing and I frequently entrust all my house plants to a friend who comes in to water them. I started noticing that when I got home from an extended trip that the orchids actually looked better than when I was home lavishing them with all kinds of attention! That is when I started to ask questions and did some research to find out what it was that I should be doing!

Obviously there are some orchids that are easier to grow than others; otherwise they would not have their temperamental reputation. I suggest that you start with an easy one. The easiest to grow is a Phalaenopsis (fal-en-OP-sis) orchid. If you can grow African Violets you can grow this type of orchid. It is also called a Moth orchid and they are widely available at a variety of colors and prices. The older and larger the orchid the more money you will spend. They generally start to bloom their third year of growth.

Orchids can be grown in any type of pot. That said, you need to know that they naturally grow as epiphytes (attached to other things like tree bark) with their roots mostly exposed to air. That makes it VERY important that you do not to over water them and to be sure that they DO NOT stand in water. Any pot selected should drain quickly. Roots should look white or green and should be smooth and turgid. Brown and black roots are not a good thing and should tell you to ease up on the water, as the roots are probably rotting.

To keep your orchid from developing root rot you should use a special orchid potting mix. Bark chips are the easiest to find, for Phalaenopsis use a medium coarse bark. Repot your orchids every two or more years. You will know it is time to repot when the bark starts to break down and /or the plant starts to out grow the pot. Wait to repot until after they bloom in the spring. When you change the potting mix you can often put them back into the same pot. As long as the roots fit into the pot don't go to a larger size. To repot, remove the plant from the pot and wash off all the bark from the roots, use slightly warm water. This will make roots more elastic and they will be easier to work with. Snip off any black, brown, or mushy roots. Return the roots to the pot and add bark. Not as easy as it sounds but it does not have to be done very often and it is not as bad as using dirt! Be sure to keep the base of the plant on top of the bark, don't bury it.

Watering your orchid is the most important thing you need to learn to keep them healthy. Over water them and the roots will rot and the orchid will die. When in doubt don't water. When you do water, give them a good soaking. I put mine in the kitchen sink and let the water run through for a several minutes. I make sure the excess has drained out and then do it again. As you water you may notice the roots turn

from white to green, which is fine, it just means that the roots are absorbing water. When to water is the hardest thing to figure out, I generally let them go a couple of weeks and then just to make sure I will dig gently around the potting mix to see how dry it is below the surface. Orchids will not wilt until extremely in need of water, but they will wrinkle or shrink a little as the reserve of water in the plant is used up. Again, if in doubt don't water!

Phalaenopsis like humidity of 50% or higher this is more than normally found in a home with a heating and cooling system. To help them, fill a shallow waterproof tray with pea gravel or decorative glass beads and then fill it half way to the top with water. Place your orchid on top making sure the water does not touch the bottom of the pot. Add water to the tray every few days as needed.

Fertilize you Phalaenopsis every other week with a half strength fertilizer. Use a 3:1:1 ratio fertilizer. During the winter orchids need less fertilizer so dilute even further. The only exception is November during that month use a 1:3:1 fertilizer. November is when the flower buds are forming. When you see a flower spike or new growth go back to normal fertilizing.

Phalaenopsis grow well in normal household temperatures, their temperature range is 60 to 85 degrees. Place them in a south or east window. The leaves should be a yellow green color; if the leaves are dark green they need more light. Another sign that more light is needed is evident when a new leaf grows longer and narrower than an older leaf.

When you have done everything right you should be rewarded with a flower spike that usually shows up in February. The spike will grow toward the strongest light. Don't turn the plant after a spike has emerged, let that spike grow straight toward the light for best results! Then enjoy! The flowers can last up to two months!

One last thing, let those roots wander. They may look messy to you at first but they help the plant absorb water and nutrients from the air!