



Orchids for Beginners – Your First Orchid

September 2006

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So you have your first orchid! Perhaps it was a gift from a special friend or an impulse buy, but now you need to know how to make it grow. In any given month I get several emails from people that have just one orchid or who know almost nothing about orchids except that they were given or purchased a plant labeled “Exotic Orchid”. Most of us were once in the same predicament but have forgotten how difficult it was in the beginning. While each inquiry is different, there is a familiar theme.

Most of the questions I get come via email or phone. Non-botanists typically provide fascinating descriptions of the plants they have, e.g. “a green stick with round leaves at the bottom” or “green tubes with white stuff around the pot”. It is often a challenge just to figure out whether the plant is alive or just a flower stem with a few flowers. Many phals that are taken into homes lose their leaves, but maintain a few flowers on the inflorescence. Sadly, most of the plants are too far gone to save, but it is still not too late to hook a potential new hobbyist on this fascinating group of plants.

Many of these inquiries come from experienced plant people who are ready to learn more about orchids. The first question that must be answered is what kind of orchid do you have? It is important to answer this question because different kinds of orchids require different kinds of care. Does the orchid in question have bulbs (technically pseudobulbs) that emerge from the pot? If the answer is yes, then the orchid is most likely a member of the Oncidium group or a dendrobium. How many flowers were on the plant? The answer should be many. Cattleyas, which usually have just a few large flowers, are rarely given as gifts unless you live in Florida or Hawaii. In all cases where there are pseudobulbs, culture requires that the stuff in the pot dry out thoroughly before it is watered again. Technically this is not called soil, but growing medium.

If there are no obvious bulbs on the plant it is likely a phalaenopsis or moth orchid. Guessing a phalaenopsis is always a good bet as this is the most popular orchid sold in the U.S. and the world. Occasionally, paphs (Asian lady slippers) are also available. Both phals and paphs require more water than orchids with bulbs so culture of this kind of orchid requires that the plant be allowed to dry, but not to the point where the surface of the medium in the pot is “crisp”.

Be sure that you look at the pot in which the plant is growing. In many cases, the pot that contains the orchid was for display in the store and not one in which the orchid will grow. In some cases the display pot will not contain any drainage holes at all, which are mandatory for all kinds of orchids. If an orchid has been in a pot without drainage for any length of time, it may be rootless and doomed.

The second question asked is how one grows this exotic orchid plant. That is an extremely complex question, as experienced hobbyists know. An experienced grower would examine the medium and the condition of the plant and decide if repotting is necessary or



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if the plant could be saved at all. Generally, novice growers cannot successfully repot an orchid and even if someone does it for them, they will be unable to provide conditions that will allow the orchid to reestablish.

The best cultural tip for the newly purchased first orchid is to understand that orchids do not have to be continuously drenched. Like people, they like a good soaking from time to time and then lots of air movement and light. Humidity around 60% is ideal. Most pot plants arrive in relatively dense media, such as sphagnum or a peat-based material. Typically, these are grown under very controlled conditions before sale and plants are forced to grow rapidly with the addition of lots of fertilizer. This means that little additional fertilizer will be needed for a while and that the orchid can handle what might seem to be extreme drying. Orchids, rarely die from lack of water if grown in this type of medium. Avoid the beginner's mistake of buying orchid fertilizer. It will not help your plant!

The secret to watering any orchid is to water thoroughly with good quality water. Never use water that has been through a water softener. Soak the orchid plant thoroughly and then water again thoroughly again after 20 minutes or set the whole plant and pot in a bucket of water for 20-30 minutes. This soaks even the driest medium and removes excess fertilizer salts. Put your new orchid in a bright window, southern or east facing is best and hope for the best. If you are able to avoid over watering, new roots and leaves will soon be forthcoming. If, as is often the case, the orchid dies and you still want to grow an orchid, go to one of big chain home improvement stores.

They often have orchids for sale off to the side that have finished blooming and are available for just a few dollars. Pick the orchid up by the leaves. If it pulls out of the pot it is already doomed. Find an orchid that is green and not wilted. These are excellent learner orchids and with a little luck will ultimately grow and bloom for you. You may have to repeat this last step several times before you learn to grow orchids. Good orchid growers learned from trial and error and killed more than a few orchids before they became "semi-pros".