

Orchids in the Home

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Orchids have been a subject of human fascination for hundreds of years. Europeans began collecting orchids from Asia and the West Indies in the early 1700's, and they brought tons of plants to England, but few survived the long trip in the hold of a ship. There are plenty of orchids native to Europe, but they aren't as big and showy as many of the tropical orchids. In fact, orchids grow on every continent, and the state flower of Minnesota is the Lady Slipper Orchid. Vanilla planifolia is native to South America and was used by the Aztecs for flavoring. A vanilla bean is the fruit of this plant.

Orchids are actually relatively easy houseplants, but they need more light to bloom than most other house plants. Conditions suitable for African Violets will work for many orchids. Most of the orchid plants available in grocery stores and nurseries will bloom readily if given enough light and not too much water. Insufficient light and too much water are the two main reasons that orchids do poorly in homes. They want strong indirect light such as from an East or South facing window. A skylight provides almost ideal light.

Water should be given only once a week or when the growing medium is dry. Over-watering is the most common problem in potted orchids. Most are adapted to some water deprivation, and the roots will rot if they sit in damp medium. Put your finger one inch into the growing medium, and it should be dry. Fertilizing is easily done by mixing orchid fertilizer with the weekly dose of water. This gives a very weak solution of fertilizer. You can pour the water over the medium or dunk the whole pot in water. If you see any white crystals accumulating on the pot, omit fertilizer and drench the pot in plain water to remove fertilizer salts. Orchids grow very slowly, so they don't need much fertilizer. A good orchid fertilizer has nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium and micronutrients such as iron, copper and magnesium.

Orchids may be epiphytic, meaning they grow on other plants, or terrestrial, meaning they grow in soil. Some grow on rocks. Most commercially available orchids are epiphytic. To mimic natural root conditions for an epiphytic plant, we use chunks of fir bark or coconut husk or perlite, or combinations of these or similar ingredients. Epiphytic plants naturally grow with their roots in the air, so they need good air circulation around the roots. This can be provided with a porous pot such as unglazed clay or plastic with slits or holes in the pot. Many orchids can be mounted on pieces of wood, and their roots will grow around and cling to the wood.

One lovely, easy-to-grow orchid is *Bletilla striata*, the Chinese Ground Orchid. It is on the UCD Arboretum All Stars list and grows outside in shade or part shade in the garden or in pots. It grows from small bulb-like roots and produces pink or lavender flowers in June. It tolerates our cold winters, but it does go dormant in the winter.

On Saturday, September 8, Master Gardeners present "Trash to Garden Treasure". Learn the secrets of recycling and repurposing discards in your garden. The class is offered at no charge. It starts at 9:00 a.m. and is held in the Veterans Memorial Building, 130 Placerville Dr., in Placerville.

The Master Gardener Fall Plant Sale is only a week and half away, on Saturday, September 15th from 8:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. in the parking lot of the Veterans Memorial Building. It's also

a great opportunity to purchase winter veggie starts and lots of other interesting plants for your garden and landscape.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook. Master Gardeners are available to answer questions most Saturdays at the Placerville Farmer's Market and most Sundays at the El Dorado Hills Farmer's Markets.

Do you have plastic feed sacks or plant containers to recycle? Master Gardeners will gladly take them at the Master Gardener Office. Call before dropping them off and thank you for the donation.