

## Troubleshooting Orchids

Orchids have such an intriguing, exotic appeal, you may assume that they are difficult to cultivate. But orchids are tougher than you may think. Like all houseplants they present some challenges, but nothing extraordinary.

In nature, orchids are either terrestrial (growing in the ground) or epiphytic (growing on other plants). They have colonized environments from the rain forest floor to the upper levels of the forest canopy. They are adaptable organisms that withstand drenching rain, tropical breezes, high humidity, and extended dry spells. Understanding the conditions of your orchid's native habitat is helpful in knowing what it will need to flourish in your home. With the thousands of orchid species available, there are choices for almost every situation.

Orchids require appropriate amounts of light, water, and fertilizer; good drainage and air circulation; and humidity. When all of these components are in place, you will have a healthy orchid. These troubleshooting pointers will add to your success.

### **Houseplant rule No. 1:**

Whenever you have a houseplant, orchid or otherwise, that has a serious disease problem or has been irreparably damaged by neglect or overwatering, throw it out. Do not waste your time fighting a potentially losing battle.

### **How do I get my orchid to rebloom?**

This is one of the most common questions for the beginner. Remember that each orchid has its own seasonal cycle. Some flower only once a year, while others flower several times during the course of a year. Certain *Dendrobium* orchids require a dormant period (reduce water, fertilizer, temperature, and keep in bright light) before they flower. Other orchids, such as *Cymbidium*, need a substantial drop in temperature to induce flowering.

The main reason why most orchids in the home do not flower is that they don't receive enough light. Another reason is the lack of temperature differential between day and night. The temperature needs to drop at least 10 degrees at night for many orchids to rebloom. One easy way to accomplish this is to move the orchid close to (but not touching) a window.

### **Is my orchid getting enough light?**

To check light levels in your home, place your hand one foot away from your orchid. If you see a well-defined shadow on the leaves, there is enough light to grow a sun-loving orchid such as *Cattleya*. A faint shadow means that one of the more shade-tolerant orchids, such as *Phalaenopsis* or *Paphiopedilum*, will do well in your home.

Another simple way of testing whether your plant is getting enough light is to look at the leaf color of your orchid. Ideally, the majority of orchids should have a grass-green color to their foliage when the light is right. If the leaves on your orchid are dark green, then it probably needs more light. If the leaves are yellow, then it may be receiving too much light (although yellow leaves can be an indication of several problems).

### **What is the easiest way to provide supplemental lighting?**

Sometimes extra light is needed. Standard fluorescent lights work fine as long as you have tubes (four of each) of both warm (red) and cool (blue) lights. The red light (warm) promotes flowering, while the blue light (cool) encourages lush green foliage. The tubes should be a minimum of 48 inches in length, and plants should be positioned no more than 8–10 inches below the lights. Light intensity is stronger in the center of the tube, so organize your plants accordingly. Artificial lights are not as strong as natural lights and should be kept on a timer for 14–16 hours in summer and 10–14 in winter.

### **Why does my orchid have yellow leaves?**

It could just be part of its natural aging process, or it could be a number of other reasons. Clean up the plant by cutting off the dead leaves. An orchid can have yellow leaves because you are giving it either too much or too little water and the roots are deteriorating and not enough nutrients are reaching the leaves. Pull your orchid out of its pot and take a look at the roots to diagnose your problem.

**Why does my orchid have brown tips on the leaves?**

Brown tips on your orchid leaves are often a sign of moisture problems caused by a lack of water or a lack of humidity. Increase the frequency of watering or place your orchid on a tray of pebbles filled with water to raise the humidity. Clean the pebble tray every two months with a 10 percent bleach solution so that bacteria do not breed in the damp environment.

**What do I do when the aerial roots on my orchid shrivel and dry up?**

Shriveled aerial roots mean that you need to increase the level of humidity. If the roots are completely dead, cut them off. Don't be too hasty, however: Orchid roots and pseudobulbs continue to function even when they look like they are on their way out.

**What do I do about black spots on the leaves of my orchid?**

Black spots on your orchid can mean a number of things. If the spots increase in size and get mushy, then the plant probably has a fungal disease. Cut off the damaged sections and sprinkle cinnamon (a natural fungicide) around the infected area. Some *Oncidium* will develop tiny black speckles on their leaves if you splash cold water on them. Don't worry—it is only cosmetic.

**Why are the leaves on my orchid wrinkled?**

If the leaves on your orchid are wrinkled in the shape of an accordion, then you are not giving the plant enough water. Give it a good drink, making sure water runs through the pot, and then increase the frequency of your watering. Your watering regimen will depend on the intensity of light as well as the temperature and humidity level in your home. Once you rectify the situation, the new leaves will grow normally, but the wrinkled leaves will not straighten out.

**What is bud blast?**

Bud blast is when the flower buds on your orchid yellow and fall off before opening. *Phalaenopsis* and *Dendrobium* are particularly susceptible to this. The most common reason for bud blast is a sudden temperature change or low levels of humidity. Other causes include drafts from windows, cigarette smoke, or ethylene gas emitted from a fruit bowl or leaking heater. When an orchid is in bud, protect it from these situations; also make sure the plant does not dry out during this phase of its life.

**What do I do about pests?**

While you might be tempted to discard the plant, first try these simple remedies. Begin by isolating the orchid from other plants. For pests such as mealy bugs and scale, apply rubbing alcohol (70 percent isopropyl alcohol) with a cotton swab or a soft toothbrush. If the orchid is sensitive to alcohol, dilute the mixture with water. To get rid of aphids, spray the plant with a mixture of dish soap and water. Another method of combating pests is to spray your plant with a mixture of two tablespoons of Murphy's Oil Soap® to one quart of water. For all insect problems, if you treat the orchid every week for three to four weeks, the problem should clear up.

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