

A 12-Step Plan for Becoming a Successful Orchid Grower

IF YOU ARE NEW TO THE ORCHID hobby and perhaps feel you are not enjoying the success with your plants that you had hoped for, read through these suggestions and see if you can find an idea or two that will help you turn your hobby in the right direction.

1. **Start accumulating an orchid library.** If you do not already own some, find books on growing orchids. Purchase them and read them. You can shop for new titles at a local bookstore or on line at www.aos.org, the Society's site that offers links to Amazon.com and OrchidsBooks.com.

The best book choices for beginners are often the comparatively inexpensive paperback volumes that are frequently part of a series produced by garden supply manufacturers. You are looking for books that will introduce you to the major groups of orchids, and briefly explain the general growing conditions that they need to be successfully cultivated in a home environment or hobby greenhouse. Such books usually include chapters explaining how different types of orchid plants grow, how and when to repot them, and some basic information about watering, fertilization and pest control.

Do not overlook a visit to your nearest local used book store as well. Or visit used-book shops on line and travel afar from the comfort of your own home. Many useful books written on orchid growing in recent decades are now out of print. The techniques for growing orchids have not changed much of late. Nomenclature, however, has changed. There may be some unfamiliar and outdated plant names encountered in some of the older titles, particularly if you are enough of an orchid newcomer to be familiar only with the orchid nomenclature of the last couple of years. Still, many of these books contain much valuable information, and some of them are, to me, irreplaceable.

It is possible that books have become obsolete for some who may prefer to gather their information via the information super highway known as the Internet. I am sure that can work just as well, but I wonder if hopping between Web sites and jumping in and out of various chat rooms and forums provides the clarity and focused point of view that a good author or editor can lend to a well written book, especially if you are a beginner.

2. **Establish a good and sensible basic cultural regime for your orchids.** By reading and gathering information, you should gain an appreciation for the environment necessary to grow orchids and should determine how you will supply those conditions for your plants.

I would recommend that you make a decision about the growing medium you intend to use for your plants. Most growers favor some type of mix. The best growing medium for you will depend to a large extent on your environment for growing orchids. The type of pot you use, how you care for your plants, and even the area of the country in which you live also affect which type of growing mix, and what ratio of ingredients is best for you.

Start with a basic or standard medium that can often be purchased premixed. Vary it only as you add orchids with special growing requirements or determine a problem with your plants that you feel certain is related to the conditions in the root zone.

When getting started, it is a good idea to make a schedule for routine tasks such as watering and fertilizing. Good growers eventually come to appreciate when it is time to give their plants an extra watering or skip a day or two, but in the early stages, you will probably avoid the disasters associated with overwatering if you stick to the calendar. At the risk of over generalization, I would suggest that watering twice a week is sufficient.

3. **Check your plants frequently.** If you are like most who are bitten by the orchid bug, you will find yourself spending time with your plants daily. This is a good habit to develop. Resist the temptation to water your plants on your daily inspections or you will soon be looking forward to buying new plants. Instead, take time to carefully look over the plants and you will learn much from them. You will begin to appreciate when the plants are in active growth and when they are resting. You will learn to marvel at the development of orchid roots and the formation of new leads, leaves and flowers.

Keep a vigilant eye out for signs of pests and disease. Be sure to periodically examine the underside of foliage and turn plants to examine the parts that are turned from your view — that is where the pests always seem to hide. Learn to recognize the signs of a plant under stress and try to determine how to modify the environment to alleviate that stress. At the same time, appreciate which of your plants are thriving, and consider why they are doing well.

4. **Do not overcrowd your collection of orchid plants.** Crowded plants suffer for sufficient light and the good air movement that produces healthy orchid plants. They are more prone to diseases, and pest problems spread more quickly among them. I am not saying that your plants should never touch, but you should be able to recognize each of your orchid plants as an individual when you look upon them. Plants with sufficient space around them are not only healthier, but are also easier to examine and maintain.
5. **Avoid acquiring too many different types of orchids too quickly.** The orchid family is a huge one, unquestionably with something for everyone. When starting out, stick with some of the more popular and basic types. These are the ones you will find discussed in your beginner orchid books. After you gain success with those you can branch out into some of the more unusual and esoteric types. For the first year or two, it is a good idea to learn to grow the popular sorts and thus gain an appreciation for what might be called “basic orchid culture.”
6. **Let your orchid success lead you to new orchid acquisitions.** As your experience with orchids accumulates, you will likely observe that some plants in your collection are out-performing others. Each grower seems to have a knack for cultivating certain kinds of orchids. When you discover yours, go with it. Seek additional orchid species or hybrids of the same or similar type. You may want to research a hybrid orchid’s lineage and look to its parents or descendants for compatible plants. Although this approach to building a successful collection may seem simple and obvious, far too many doggedly insist on attempting to grow orchids that do not succeed for them and eventually reach the point of being sufficiently discouraged to give up the hobby entirely.
7. **Purchase blooming-sized orchid plants whenever possible.** Small, young orchid plants may take several years to reach flowering size, and it is likely that flowering will occur only if growing conditions are ideal. In most cases, it is easier to sustain a mature plant than it is to nurture a young one and you will not have to wonder if your plant is failing to bloom because it is immature or whether growing conditions are unfavorable.

The best way to know a plant is flowering size is to purchase it in flower, although a mature

plant that has bloomed will often bear evidence of that. Buying a plant in bloom also guarantees that the flower you get is the one you are expecting, as some orchid species and hybrids exhibit considerable variability.

Blooming-size orchid plants are unquestionably more expensive than their juvenile counterparts, but I think they are worth it. This is particularly true for beginners who may not have the patience to wait for a few years for their orchids to start producing flowers.

8. **Keep some records on your orchid collection.** It is the best way to help monitor your progress and assist you in keeping up with routine tasks.

Record keeping does not have to be extensive or involve a lot of technology to be useful. A few basic bits of information kept on a pot label often suffices. Most importantly, you need to have the name of the plant written legibly and indelibly. Other useful data might include the date the plant was acquired, where it was purchased, when it was in flower, the number of flowers it produced and the date the plant was last repotted. Some growers also like to keep track of the fertilizer schedule for their plants as well as any treatments the plant may have received for pests and diseases.

This may seem like a lot of information for a plastic pot label, so some growers maintain card files or small databases on the plants in their collections. The amount of information you record is a personal decision, but at the very least, in addition to the plant's name, you should keep track of its repotting date to help prioritize your efforts at repotting time.

9. **Admit your failures.** Cull your collection regularly of those plants that are struggling and slowly dying. Many declining orchids seem to be able to cling to life for months or years, yet I do not think I have ever seen anyone bring one back from the brink of death to become a thriving, healthy specimen. Do not try to pass off such plants to a friend or unsuspecting novice, or worse yet, donate them to the divisions table at your orchid society to resell or give away.

These plants need to go to the trash or compost heap, but try to learn from your mistakes. Attempt to determine why the plant declined. Perhaps it was a cultural problem that you have now solved so that you might succeed in the future with the same or a similar orchid plant. If, on the other hand, you suspect that the orchid failed due to limitations of your growing environment or some inability on your part to understand how to grow it, you would perhaps be well advised to avoid adding that sort of orchid to your collection in the future, at least until you are able to learn more and modify your cultural practices.

10. **Join your nearest orchid society, one of the best places to learn about growing orchids.** There you should find all levels of orchid growing expertise and experts who can advise you on how to grow orchids well in the particular area in which you live. You can find a list of affiliated societies on line at the AOS Web site (www.aos.org) under "Affiliates."

Do not be discouraged if your first visit to an orchid society meeting feels a bit like a visit abroad. Orchid growers speak their own language and it takes a bit of time to understand and appreciate some of the terminology and nomenclature.

Orchid societies vary in their operation and organization, but most are welcoming of new members. Be sure to arrive a bit early when you make your first appearance at an orchid society meeting. Make sure you introduce yourself and let some of the members know you are new and interested in learning more about how to grow orchids successfully and are interested in how their organization might enhance that effort.

Thriving societies usually have a variety of activities that occur during the course of their meetings. Many have special events and sessions for novice members, too. As you become better acquainted and involved in the organization, you will likely make lasting friendships and find opportunities to participate in activities such as orchid shows and visits to orchid growers, both commercial and private.

While it seems harder and harder in today's world to find time to join and participate in a special interest club such as a local orchid society, most who join and get involved will tell you it is a thoroughly rewarding experience. If you are not already a member, you should also join the American Orchid Society (www.aos.org).

11. **Seek answers to your questions and solutions to your problems.** People can and do successfully grow orchids in residential environments in an amazing variety of ways. If you are not enjoying success, there are individuals and groups out there that should be able to help.

Look to orchid societies, libraries, greenhouses and garden centers, botanic gardens and the Internet for help. Gather information and try to sort out the best of it, being aware that too much information can be more confusing than too little. Perhaps the best advice for a struggling orchidist might be to simplify things as much as possible, both in the number and kinds of plants being cultivated, as well as to simplify their cultural practices. Many orchids, indeed, thrive on neglect.

12. **Visit an orchid show.** You can locate one near you by checking the calendar in Orchids magazine or looking on the AOS Web site. A bit of a drive will be worth it. At the show you will have opportunities to meet and learn from orchid enthusiasts, to see and acquire beautiful orchids and to be inspired. It is virtually guaranteed to renew your enthusiasm for your orchid hobby.