

Diary of a Gardenholic: Orchids for a Change...

By Monica Gaylord (& Jennifer Bird)

Gardening in Texas can be quite a challenge. Just as you set out your winter garden, you watch temperatures plummet or the rains drown your fingerlings. Along comes beautiful spring ...but high winds, torrential rains and even hail may wreak havoc on your tender sprouts as well as the stouter plants and hanging baskets. If the slugs, caterpillars, pill bugs and grasshoppers don't get them, the summer sun just might!

Why do we do it? As a gardening fanatic, I cannot get through my day without a walk outdoors past a recently planted strawberry pot or through the arbor for a whiff of the blooming white jasmine. A newly tilled patch of dirt calls my name until I can fill it with all varieties of goodies.

So, with all these seasonal obstacles, what other options do we gardeners have to get our daily fix? I raise orchids! And I grow them indoors.

Indoor gardening is a remedy I find that appeals to almost all my senses: the sight of a beautiful orchid in bloom for months, yes months at a time; the sound of oohs and aahs from our northern visitors who rarely see tropicals up close and personal; the chocolate-raspberry fragrance of *Oncidium Sharry Baby*, or a multitude of corsage-quality *Cattleyas* in bloom that fill the air with their heavenly scents.

Too scary? Or hard to grow? Nonsense! Picture yourself standing in a nice, cool room spritzing a new growth from a pretty pot right on your kitchen windowsill while the air outside the windows is less than ideal. Here's how!

Step One: Buy a full-grown blooming orchid from your local nursery or garden center. (The younger, smaller plants are not quite as forgiving if you go on a long vacation, and may be several years away from blooming.) You should ask your nursery to recommend one that is "easy to grow on a windowsill". Full-grown doesn't necessarily mean large. Many orchids are small when fully mature. Prices range from \$15 - \$45 and up, and there are some great orchid nurseries in Austin and the surrounding area. See your yellow pages.

Step Two: Find a window in your home that gets filtered sunlight most of the day (usually one with a southern or eastern exposure). The kitchen and bathroom are ideal locations because of their humidity. If there is a ceiling fan, leave it on (as if the tropical breezes are blowing through the jungle).

If windows with adequate light are unavailable, consider cultivating orchids under artificial lights. Remember some types of Orchids need high levels of natural sunlight to bloom consistently and cannot be successfully flowered in the home.

Step Three: Place your potted plant on a plate or dish full of pebbles (or on egg-crate humidity trays) in the windowsill to raise the humidity. Be sure to protect your sill if it is wood by using a coaster underneath. Also be sure the pot has a hole or two in it for drainage.

Step Four: Keep the pebbles (or tray) wet, but do not let the water touch the pots! The plants prefer constant humidity, especially since air conditioning that is comfortable for us dries out the pots quickly. A daily spritzing of your plants is also helpful.

Step Five: Water the pot weekly, weakly. In other words, every time you water, add about ½ to 1 teaspoon of fertilizer to a gallon of water. After first wetting the pot thoroughly with plain water, pour the fertilizer solution through the pot into the sink. No need to use the whole gallon, just enough to soak the medium. Clay pots dry faster than plastic, so keep this in mind to determine how often to water. Once a month, run plain water through the pot to rinse out the salt deposits (from the fertilizer).

Most orchids that die do so from over-watering. Let the roots dry out between baths. Your plant should begin sending out new growths within a couple of months. These will produce more blooms the same time next year, or even immediately, depending which type of orchid you bought.

Orchids do not need dirt to grow. Potting an orchid in soil is actually one of the best ways to kill it. Most are grown in a mix of bark, perlite, charcoal, tree fern or some other loosely packed material, which keeps roots well-aerated and permits water to drain quickly. A lack of oxygen will cause an orchid's roots to suffocate and rot.

In the wild most orchids attach themselves by thick roots to the sides or branches of trees. Clinging to the bark, the plants absorb water and nutrients from the air and rain and whatever drips down the tree. They are adapted to surviving when rain is scarce, hoarding water in thick leaves, stems and roots.

In about six months to one year, dump the plant out and see if the roots look healthy. If the root tips are green and growing, and the rest of the root is white and fleshy, voila! You are doing a great job. Being careful not to damage these roots, firmly repot your orchid in the same pot (or a larger one if needed). Use the same medium, or buy fresh Orchid Bark Mix at your nursery if yours looks too decomposed. Some orchids, such as Dendrobiums, usually like to be crowded. If your orchid is walking out of the pot, use a larger pot. Each consecutive growth should be larger than the first.

Having problems? Take your plants to the Heart O' Texas Orchid Society for a quick and free diagnosis. The club meets the first Monday of most every month at 7:30 pm at Zilker Botanical Garden Center, and the members are eager to help you. Internationally acclaimed speakers, local grower demonstrations and orchid auctions will help you get acquainted with this intriguing jewel. Doors are open at 6:45 pm to view the show table and visit with other orchid enthusiasts.

Remember, the most difficult part will be limiting yourself to just what will fit on your windowsill!