



## **A Beginners Guide to Orchids**

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Orchids, with their captivating beauty and elegance, have long held a revered status among plant enthusiasts. If you're tempted to dive into orchids, this is the perfect time to explore what's available as it is orchid show season. Those looking for a day trip might want to explore Florals in Fashion at the New York Botanic Garden until April 21. Closer to home, the CT Orchid Society holds its show April 20-21 at the Bristol Senior Center.

Often associated with exotic locales and intricate care routines, these plants are surprisingly adaptable and many can thrive in the comfort of your own home. Whether you're a seasoned gardener or a novice looking to add a touch of sophistication to your indoor space, cultivating orchids can be a rewarding endeavor.

Orchids belong to one of the largest and most diverse plant families, Orchidaceae, comprised of over 25,000 species. They come in various shapes, sizes, and colors, but broadly speaking, orchids can be categorized into two main groups based on their growing habits: epiphytic and terrestrial. Epiphytic orchids grow on trees and absorb their moisture and nutrients mostly from rain. They are usually found in tropical rainforests and need a specialized bark based growing medium. Terrestrial orchids grow in soil and while the most spectacularly colored ones come from the tropics, we are fortunate to have native terrestrial orchids such as lady slippers.

Another important distinction among orchids is their growth pattern, which can be classified as sympodial or monopodial. Sympodial orchids grow horizontally sending out new shoots or

pseudobulbs from a rhizome or creeping stems. Cymbidiums and dendrobiums are species that exhibit this behavior. Monopodial orchids grow vertically, with a single stem that continues to elongate as the plant matures. Paphiopedilum and vanda species have this growth habit.

Understanding these distinctions can help you tailor your plant care routine to suit the needs of your orchids.

The key to growing orchids successfully in the home is understanding the conditions they need to grow and thrive. These will vary according to the species but in general orchids need bright, indirect light. East and south windows usually supply ample light, but a sheer curtain may be needed to keep orchids out of hot sun from south windows during the summer. Direct sunlight may burn their leaves. Orchids also do well under artificial light.

Next to light, temperature is critical as some like it hot and others thrive in a cooler environment. It makes the most sense to select the orchid species that would do well in the temperature range you prefer. Most species, however, are happiest if there is a 5 to 10 degrees drop in night temperatures.

Orchids also tend to do best in more humid environments and our homes are mostly on the dry side. Consider using a humidifier, using pebble filled trays under plants or even growing plants in ornamental glass cases.

Making sure your orchids are receiving the proper amount of watering can be challenging to beginners. Terrestrial orchids are usually grown in an orchid bark & enriched potting soil mix and need to be kept moist but not overly wet. Epiphytic orchids in orchid pots with bark or attached to slabs of tree ferns can be drenched or dunked and then drained. The roots should not sit in water very long. Some experimentation will be needed to determine frequency of waterings.



There are so many species of orchids to choose from but beginning orchid enthusiasts might start off with dendrobium species. Dendrobiums are one of the largest and most diverse orchid genera made up of numerous species as well as hybrids. They are even sold at my local grocery store. Dendrobiums are known for their brightly colored flowers that usually bloom in clusters along long stems. They are relatively easy to care for and tolerate typical household conditions.

Phalaenopsis orchids are another large genus that are tolerant of a range of household conditions so are ideal for beginners. Plants can tolerate a little less light than many other species so east windows work well. Nighttime drops in temperature are important to initiate new flower stalks.

Those with cooler growing spaces might want to try Cymbidiums. These plants are just gorgeous in bloom with their long-lasting sprays of colorful flowers. Cool temperatures and bright light are keys to healthy, floriferous plants.

Lady slipper orchids (*Paphiopedilum*) have distinctive pouch-shaped blooms, similar to our native lady slippers. They are terrestrial orchids preferring a very well-draining potting mix and indirect light.

If orchids are just too alluring, try to attend an orchid show or two, visit local garden centers that sell orchids and can answer your questions about them, or even check out the resources at the American Orchid Society (<https://www.aos.org/>) to find out information about caring for these beautiful, mysterious and addictive plants. For basic orchid information or if you have any other gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or [www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu](http://www.homegarden.cahnrc.uconn.edu) or your local Cooperative Extension Center.