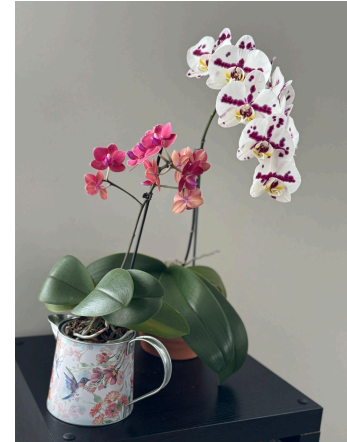


Beginner Orchid Tips

Phalaenopsis (moth) orchids

Gorgeous orchids beckon as you step into a store, or a friend brings you a beautiful orchid, and now as you enjoy the pretty blooms on your coffee table, you wonder how to care for it. Here are a few basic tips.

- Type of orchid: There are hundreds of types of orchids, but the most common one you see in a store is a **phalaenopsis (phals for short) or moth orchid**. The tips below relate to the care of this type of orchid.



Phalaenopsis orchids are pretty hardy orchids and have few requirements:

Light: They like bright light. In places like Ohio, phals thrive in direct sunlight from an east or south facing window. In places like Texas where the sun can be pretty scorching, they prefer bright indirect light, or sunlight filtered through a sheer curtain.

Water: Phals like to dry out between waterings. Too much water can lead to rot. If in doubt, wait a couple of days before watering. They can handle a brief dry spell better than waterlogged roots.

Temperature: Phals like warmer temperatures (over 55F). If you have them near a window in winter, check for drafts. A sudden drop in temperature can cause flowers to drop.

Humidity: The thick leaves of phalaenopsis orchids make them pretty tolerant of low humidity. The plants don't really need to be misted, and humidity trays don't make much of a difference. If your orchid has aerial roots (roots sticking out of the pot) those can be misted every few days if it is very dry.

Fertilizer: The gardening adage of "watering weekly weakly" holds true for orchids too. You can fertilize orchids at almost every watering, but use half or quarter of the recommended dosage. My first year of growing orchids, I just used an easily available orchid fertilizer spray every time I watered. Fertilizing is good, but not essential, so get comfortable watering your orchid before adding fertilizer to the routine.

So now that you know the conditions your orchid prefers, let's dive into the care for these lovely plants.

- **Look for the inner plastic pot:** Most store bought orchids are in a transparent plastic pot placed within a decorative pot. Without disturbing the plant, take the plastic pot out of the decorative pot. It should have good drainage holes at the bottom of this inner pot.
- **Air circulation:** Orchids like good air circulation. The inner plastic pots are usually pretty snug within the decorative pot. Place a few pebbles or Legos at the bottom of the decorative pot to raise the inner pot and provide a little space between the two for air circulation. You could also just use a larger decorative pot.



- **Observe the color of the roots:** Look at the roots through the side of the transparent plastic pot. If it looks silvery grey it needs to be watered. Roots will turn a bright green after watering.
- **Type of medium:** Check to see if your orchid is planted in bark or moss.

Watering your phalaenopsis orchid.

If the roots of your phal are silver grey, it's time to water. Take the inner pot out of the decorative pot and water according to the medium.

Bark: if your orchid is in bark, hold it under running water for 20-30 seconds, but make sure that water drains freely through the drainage holes. Set the plant on the counter for a few hours to ensure that all excess water has drained out before placing it back in the decorative pot. Phals in bark usually need to be watered every 7-10 days, this may differ based on your climate and humidity levels in your house. Check the color of the roots to determine if your plant is ready to be watered.

Moss: If your orchid is in moss you want to ensure that you do not overwater. Mini orchids need only 1-2 tbsps of water, while large orchids need 3-4 tbsps of water. Dribble the water onto the medium and wait for the moss to absorb the water. The roots should turn green. If not, add another tbsp or water. If you accidentally overwater, just

set the pot on some paper towels to absorb excess water. Phals in moss can usually go 2 weeks between watering. Check the color of the roots to determine if your plant is ready to be watered.

This basic care will keep your phalaenopsis happy. It should rebloom around the same time every year.

A few other tips:

Ice or no ice?

You may wonder why the tag on your orchid tells you to water with ice cubes. Aren't these tropical plants? Well, overwatering phals can lead to root rot, and water left between the leaf and the stem can lead to stem rot, so ice cubes are a convenient method of limiting the amount of water that is given to a plant. However, phals don't really enjoy having a freezing cold ice cube on their roots, so use the methods described above to water. Alternatively you can let the ice cubes melt in a bowl before using it to water your plant .

My orchid looks crowded, should I repot?

Orchids like to be snug in a pot, so only repot if your orchid is growing out of its pot. Repotting always ends up damaging roots so wait to see new roots (usually spring) before repotting. The new roots will adapt to the new medium and this will help the plant adjust without too much of a set back.

It's done flowering, now what?

The thin tall stalk on which the flowers are borne is called a spike. Phals can rebloom on an old spike but the second flowering will have fewer flowers that are sometimes smaller. Most experts recommend cutting down the spike pretty close to the base so the plant can focus on growing bigger and stronger before reblooming. You can add a little powdered cinnamon to the cut to prevent infection.

Bringing home an orchid

When transporting an orchid in bloom, make sure it isn't exposed to really cold temperatures. Place it in a covered box or bag if carrying it to your car in winter, and avoid leaving it in an unheated car for long. Sudden exposure to the cold will lead to bud blast, where the buds drop without opening.

What's next?

Orchids are lovely plants. Other easy to grow orchids are oncidiums, cattleyas, and paphiopedilums (slipper orchids). Care for each of these differs slightly from phalaenopsis, but they are beautiful, and well worth the effort.



Want to know more:

American Orchid Society: <https://www.aos.org/orchid-care/orchid-care-basics>

Chat with other orchid enthusiasts both beginners and experts: Beginner Orchid Growers group on facebook.