

“KNOW” YOUR ORCHID!

In any of the gardening classes and seminars that I teach, I say “know your plant”. Of course, with any plant you can and should look up the “nuts and bolts” information: light requirements, mature size, blooming time, etc. But I like to emphasize becoming familiar with two lesser appreciated notions about plants: (1) the **growth habit**, or *how* a plant grows, and (2) the **native habitat**, or *where* a plant grows or is found in nature.

Growth Habit

The growth habit of a plant describes how the plant grows, or what the plant “does,” over the course of the year. Like many plants, many orchids are “evergreen” and retain their leaves for many years. Some orchids, however, lose just their leaves for part of the year. Not knowing this, one may misinterpret dormancy for a dead plant.

In addition, I’ve found that one of the most important skills in understanding any plant, especially orchids, is the ability to discern the youngest leaves from the oldest leaves. Identifying the youngest leaves gives you a method to assess the health of your plant. For example, it is not uncommon for healthy plants to shed one or more of their *oldest leaves* from time to time. However, if the *newest leaves* are discolored, disfigured or damaged in any way, there is definitely something wrong with the plant.

Native Habitat

Where a plant grows or where it is found growing “out there in nature” helps us understand how to take care of plants. A plant’s adaptations help it thrive and survive in the environmental conditions found in its native environment. Therefore, the environmental conditions in the native habitat gives us clues for how to take care of that plant. For example, a plant that grows in full sun in its native habitat, may not thrive well in the shade. A plant that grows in the understory of a tropical forest might make a nice houseplant.

If you know what kind of orchid you have, you can find out what the native habitat of your orchid is like. If you reproduce the environmental conditions found in its native habitat, guess what?! Your orchid must rebloom!!

Putting these two notions together, the ultimate goal for any type of gardening is to reproduce or re-create our plant's native habitat to achieve

the desired growth habit, while having lots of fun, of course.