

WHY ORCHIDS FAIL TO REBLOOM

“KNOW” YOUR ORCHID PLANT

In any of the gardening seminars that I teach, I say “know your plant”. Of course, with any plant you can and should look up the “nuts and bolts”: light requirements, mature size, blooming time, etc. But I like to emphasize 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, some orchids are evergreen; some 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. It is not uncommon for plants to shed one or more of their *oldest leaves* from time to time, maybe during a dry part of the season or as the days get shorter in the fall. 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. However, a plant that grows in the understory of a tropical forest might make a nice houseplant.

Ultimately, the 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.

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!!

THE FIVE MAIN REASONS ORCHIDS FAIL TO REBLOOM

Therefore, if your orchid has not rebloomed in the last year or two, some aspect of your orchid's native habitat must be missing or inappropriate. After working with thousand of orchids enthusiasts over the years, I have found that almost all of the reasons orchids fail to rebloom can be grouped into five categories.

1) Light

Light, or more specifically the lack of light, is the most common reason many orchids fail to rebloom. Everyone has low light areas in the home, not everyone has direct sun. That's why some the easiest to grow houseplants tolerate or require low light. Many types of orchids (e.g. *Cattleya*, *Cymbidium*, *Vanda*, *Oncidium*, and many others) require direct sun for at least part of the day, even during winter. If you lack a sunny window, these orchids will likely not rebloom indoors. If you place the orchid on the coffee table 10 feet from a north-facing window, forget it.

Everyone has low light areas in the home, not everyone has direct sun. That's why some the easiest plants to grow indoors tolerate or require low light. One of the easiest orchids to grow as a houseplant, *Phalaenopsis*, requires warm temperatures, indirect light, and suffers in direct sun. Its native habitat already mimics the environment found inside most homes!

2) Watering / Fertilizing / Humidity

While lack of light is the most common reason many orchids fail to rebloom, misunderstanding how to water orchids is the most common reason orchids die. Most orchids are epiphytes, that is they grow in trees. Therefore, orchids must be allowed to dry out to some extent between waterings. During winter, orchids should typically be watered much less frequently than during other parts of the year.

On the other hand, during winter your heater is on and the air is typically much drier. Do not mist indoor orchids to increase humidity. If water collects in leaf folds and does not dry out, rot likely will establish and at least part of the orchid will die. Instead increase humidity by setting your orchids on a humidity tray, or a tray of wet pea gravel. Set the pot *on top of wet rocks, not in standing water*.

Use an orchid fertilizer when you water. Remember, in nature orchids are not rooted in soil, but anchored in trees and adapted to low nutrient environments. Water just the potting media and keep water off the foliage.

Some orchids indeed do not like to dry out as much as others, which is another reflection of the conditions found in that orchid's native habitat. The *Miltoniopsis* or pansy orchid, often creates pleated or accordion-like leaves when underwatered.

It would be remiss of me to make a blanket statement on how often to water your orchids. Watering frequency depends on your home, type of orchids, size of pot, etc. If you don't overwater, orchids are pretty hard to kill. If in doubt, don't water it, and know your plant.

3) Temperature

Most orchids prefer a temperature drop of 10-15F / 5-8C at night. If you turn the heat down while you're at work, and turn it up a bit when you get home, your orchids will become confused and may not rebloom. Nowhere in nature is it warmer at night than during the day.

Some orchids can tolerate quite warm temperatures (e.g. *Cattleya*, *Vanda*, *Brassia*) while some suffer in temperatures over 80F / 27C (e.g. *Miltoniopsis*, *Masdevallia*, *Odontoglossum*, *Paphiopedilum*). Know your plant!!

Cymbidiums require cool temperatures to rebloom. They must be grown outdoors whenever frost-free temperatures allow so they receive the cool nights they require. If a *Cymbidium* remains indoors through the summer and fall, it won't what time of year it is. It will continue to grow lots of nice leaves but won't rebloom.

Similarly have you ever purchased one of those jasmine hanging baskets around Valentine's Day? It remains very fragrant while in bloom, then grows lots of new branches and leaves, and never blooms again. Sound familiar? Put it outside with your *Cymbidium* – high light, cool nights, and leave them outside until right before the first frost. And once again, know your plant.

4) Pots / Potting Media / Repotting

Many people ask me if orchids are ok in plastic. I respond, “Have you ever purchased a potted orchid not in a plastic pot?” Sure, plastic pots are fine, as long as you water appropriately. Decorative orchid pots have holes in the sides for increased drainage. Upon purchasing an orchid in bloom, it should not need to be repotted for at least a year.

Orchids are grown in a potting media that mimics the conditions in nature: fir bark chips, moss, pumice or a mixture of the three. What’s required in an orchid potting media is something that retains some moisture but drains quickly.

Organic potting media like bark and moss will naturally decompose over time and become more like soil and less like the well-drained material it once was. This is an inevitable process, and is a good thing, like in your compost pile.

Therefore, I suggest that orchids in organic potting media be repotted every three years to refresh the decomposing bark or moss. If an orchid is not repotted for a few years, the potting media may decompose to a point that roots begin to rot from lack of air and poor drainage. The best time of year to repot is in spring or just as new growth begins.

When repotting, remove all the old potting media until the plant is bare root, and simply replace it with new potting media. Because some orchids require better drainage than others, the grade of potting media is also important. An orchid requiring perfect drainage (e.g. *Vanda*) will prefer a chunkier, coarse grade while others like the slipper orchids (*Paphiopedilum*, *Phragmipedium*, *Cypripedium*) prefer a finer grade of potting media that holds a little more moisture. Know your plant!

For more details on repotting orchids, see my book, ***How Orchids Rebloom***.

5) The Plant’s State of Health When You Acquired It

The condition in which you receive your orchid is the last common reason many orchids fail to rebloom. A stressed orchid that you receive from your neighbor who has given up trying after five years, or that sad one on the sale rack at the grocery store may be in such a sad state that it takes a few years for it to rebloom.

Orchids are long-lived plants. Annuals like impatiens or lobelia have only one year to bloom, create seed, and reproduce. They'll even create a couple of flowers in the most stressed of conditions. An orchid on the other hand, may decide to wait until next year to bloom if conditions are less than ideal. What's the rush? Creating flowers and the subsequent fruit / seed is like raising kids, it's expensive. An orchid is in no hurry to create that fantastic flower if conditions aren't just right. In less than ideal conditions, your orchid might decide "I have having a headache this year."

Orchids in box stores, unless they just jumped off the delivery truck, are stressed all the time. They're all displayed in the same location with typically no direct sun anywhere and no one to water them. These conditions alone may prevent them from reblooming right away. Buy your orchids from local independent garden centers, nurseries, and florists, and know your plant!