

Caring for your orchids

Orchids are tropical plants that grow on trees at the lower levels of rainforests and do not need full sun or heavy potting soil to flourish. In Chicago several genera are readily available as houseplants: Phalenopsis, Oncidium, Cymbidium, Paphiopedilum, Miltoniopsis, Dendrobium, Cattleya, Oncidiinae, and Vanda-Ascocenda. They vary in their requirements for light and water. Once they have the right growing conditions, they are not more difficult to grow than other houseplants.

LIGHT: Since orchids are native to rainforests with dappled sunlight filtered through tree canopy, similar conditions for at least 6 hours per day in the home are ideal. Stronger light will produce better blooms. Phalenopsis orchids prefer the least light of all of the genera in Chicago. Low light may be a few feet from a bright window filtered through a curtain or blinds, yet still bright enough to cast a shadow. Miltonia also grow in low light, but can also thrive in medium light along with Dendrobium and Cymbidium. The other genera prefer medium to bright light. Plants that get too little light have emerald green leaves and may not flower. Too much light and the leaves scorch with a yellow or reddish tinge.

WATER: Too much water will rot the roots and kill a plant. Orchids should dry out between waterings. A dry Phalenopsis should feel light when the pot is lifted but do not let the potting medium dry out completely. Other genera should be lightweight and feel dry to a finger stuck into the medium. The leaves of some Miltonia species fold like accordions when they need water. As potting medium (moss or moss and bark mix) ages, the air spaces in it shrink, making it retain more water. Water by moving the plant to a sink or tub and running lukewarm water through the pot.

FOOD: Orchids growing in bark need more nitrogen than phosphorous and potassium (e.g., 15-5-5 or 30-10-10). Plants growing in moss do well with a balanced fertilizer (e.g., 10-10-10). Fertilize “weakly, weekly” when actively growing foliage or blooms by feeding every watering with no more than half the strength recommended on the fertilizer label.

HUMIDITY: The ideal range for humidity is 40%-70%. Orchids like a gentle breeze from a ceiling fan or an open window. In the fall and winter, use a pebble tray to create a more humid microclimate around the plant.

TEMPERATURE: Many orchids need a 10°-15°F temperature change from night to day in order to bloom, with nighttime temperature being the more important. This may be the source of the belief that putting an ice cube in the pot will cause an orchid to produce a flower spike. Phalenopsis has an ideal night temperature range of 64°-68°F and daytime temperature 75°F and over. Ideal nighttime temperatures for most others are around 60°F. Dendrobium and Cymbidium prefer it even cooler in order to send up bud spikes—55°F.

REPOTTING: All orchids, like other houseplants, like fresh potting mix every spring even if they move into a larger pot only every 2-3 years. Phalenopsis grow in sphagnum moss and the others grow well in a mix of about 70% fir bark and 30% sphagnum moss. Orchid roots are thick and fleshy and can easily survive repotting. This is the time to assess whether the plant has been overwatered (brown, slimy, dead roots), underwatered or with too low humidity (dry, papery roots), or watered just right (white or brown-stained, fleshy roots). To repot a plant, cut and pull the plant out of its pot and pull the old potting medium out of the root ball. Trim away unhealthy roots. Wrap the healthy roots around handfuls of the fresh potting medium and put the entire root ball and medium into the pot. Water.