

Lycastes



Lyc. Calymea Yeowie

Lycastes come from the Americas and exist over a wide range from Mexico to the high Andes. Understanding this wide range of climatic conditions, from virtually sea level to approximately 2000 metres, is part of the secret of growing and flowering them.

Over the years I have found that in both species and hybrids there are "two basic types" of growth. The first group are deciduous and each season lose their leaves, flowering on mass just as the new ones are about one third grown. This is the group of lycastes that need a rest after the leaves start to brown and fall. I cut back on the watering and fertilizer only starting again as the new growth appears. The second group tend to retain their leaves for at least a few years and tend to

appreciate regular watering throughout the year. I am often asked; do you give your lycastes a rest? The answer is always, it depends on the breeding and individual plant. You will quickly tell which group your lycastes fall into when leaves start to drop, or remain green and vital.

Spring and autumn are the main flowering times and flowers need to be carefully watered and watched at this time. Water marks and knocks soon result in a nasty permanent brown mark, which often ends the plants show season for that year. Lycaste flowers similarly do not take kindly to any form of manipulation of the flower. Grow the ones that flower how you want them and you will greatly reduce both the flower and your stress level. Fortunately many lycastes flower on mass and often a damaged flower can be removed without distracting from the overall display.

Although there are exceptions, I would classify lycastes as cool growing orchids. They love similar conditions to paphiopedilums, odontoglossums and masdevallias. The large thin broad leaf is a good indication that they are also largely shade loving orchids. I grow mine all year under 70% shade cloth in a bush-house. When they come into bud I bring them into a fibreglass-roofed house to protect the flowers from the rain. Part of the secret to being successful with lycastes is rainwater if possible, (at least good quality water), good air movement afforded from a bush-house, and adequate shade especially in summer. A mistake that a lot of growers make is adequate bench space. Lycaste plants usually start small and grow very big. You must have space enough for the leaves to not excessively shade one another but receive sunlight on most of the leaf surface each day.



Overcrowding leads to a lot of losses, scale and mealy bug infestations, and poor flowering. This is a genus that is definitely worth growing, but you must give them the growing room they need.

I pot my plants in black plastic standard pots, water overhead to a degree that keeps the compost constantly moist, and fertilize weekly with a variety of chemical and organic fertilizers. Repotting and compost is important. I repot all my lycastes every two years regardless of the condition of the plant. In this way I know the age of the potting medium in every pot and can confidently water and fertilize accordingly. I have tried lots of potting mixes. What I am currently using is a 50/50 mix of medium bark/cymbidium compost. I strike cut back bulbs in sphagnum moss. I find the inclusion of some cymbidium mix in with the bark helps retain moisture. I have had plants suffer in summer when straight bark mixes dried out too much between watering. Lycastes have a fine root system and don't like to dry completely. Since I have gone over to the current mix this problem has disappeared. The greatest display of lycastes I have ever seen and most likely will ever see were those owned by Fred Alcorn. In spring his flowering house was an experience you would never forget .. hundreds of lycastes in bloom in all the colours imaginable. Fred used a mix of bark, charcoal and river sand with all his plants. This is a good mix, but stays a little too wet for me.

Lycastes are not grown by enough orchid lovers. They are a very rewarding plant that will flower on multi-spikes year after year if given the space and conditions they need.