

SUTHERLAND SHIRE ORCHID SOCIETY

Novice Growers: What NOT To Do!

Here are a few tips that I learned the hard way over the years and I pass them on to you in the hope that you will not make the same mistakes that I did when first starting to grow orchids:



1. Do not take the cymbidiums you just bought out of their pots and plant them in the ground. You may fluke it and they may flower this year or even next, but don't be fooled: They are not happy. Cymbidiums like to have crowded roots - leave them in their pots! Or if you have already taken them out of their pots, dig them back up and repot them. They will thank you for it.
2. When you find an infestation of aphids and scale on your young orchids one day, do not freak out and immediately cover the plants with pyrethrum and then leave them in the sun. This "cure" is much worse than the problem and you will end up with severely burned, if not dead, plants. Wait for a cool, preferably overcast, day and spray **lightly** with Eco Oil. You may have to repeat this treatment in six weeks' time, but that is certainly preferable to killing eight or nine orchids in one moment of frenzy!
3. Do not wait ten years from when you bought your first orchid to join a local orchid club. There is no need to have to learn everything the hard way by trial and error! The club is full of members more than happy to give you hints and help you out with your new hobby. There will probably even be a "New Growers" group already established that has special meetings to assist people just like you.
4. Do not kill your plants with kindness by over watering. Too little water is far better than too much. Too much water causes root rot, which is very difficult to get rid of once it starts.
5. Do not throw out the nametags every time you buy a new orchid. You may think you don't care about the parentage of your new plant or that the name is too long to be of any interest to you. Or when you repot your plant you may carelessly throw out the tag with the old potting mix. **Don't do it!!** Once you follow Tip #3 above, you will probably find yourself interested in competing in the club's monthly competition or even in bigger orchid shows. You will have a better chance of winning a prize in the competition if you know what your plant is and are able to put the correct name on the entry form rather than "unknown". Plus you will be able to converse with members of the club without feeling stupid once you know the proper names of your plants!
6. Unless you are rich, do not buy expensive plants when you are just starting out in your orchid hobby as you will probably end up killing them until you learn what conditions in your yard suit what type of orchids. It is very tempting to go into an orchid nursery and buy a gorgeous-looking plant that is in full bloom and think you can keep it growing that well. Don't kid yourself! That orchid was grown by a professional and in optimum conditions in the nursery's heated or cooled greenhouse, you have more chance of winning the lottery than getting that plant to bloom again in your back yard. Take Tip #3 above and ask someone at your local orchid club for suggestions on orchids best suited for novice growers.
7. If you get really lucky and your cymbidium starts to put out flower spikes that head horizontally along the top of the potting mix towards the edge of the pot instead of growing upwards, **leave the spikes alone!!** Do not try to tie them to wooden stakes so that they grow vertically. These are called "pendulous" spikes for a reason - they like to hang down below the rim of the pot. If you think you can change their mind, they will either break off in your hand or twist around into weird shapes if you even manage to get them attached to a wooden stake in the first place. Of course, not all your cymbidiums will have pendulous spikes, most will not. Be patient - wait and see what the spike wants to do before "helping" it.
8. Don't be alarmed when you find yourself becoming obsessed with acquiring more and more and more orchids. This is a common disease and cannot be cured. Resign yourself to the fact that you will be infected the rest of your life with orchidmania and just get on with it. I refer you again to

Tip #3 above---join your local orchid club so that you can commiserate about your obsession with other people who are also likewise afflicted. You may be surprised: your small collection of 150 orchids or so will probably look like a mere garden nook compared to the thousands of plants the more senior members of the club have packed into their back yards!

9. On a really hot day (like 1 January 2006 in Sydney), don't spend all day on the couch in front of a fan complaining about the temperature. If you do, the next day you will go outside to see how your orchids fared in the heat - and you will soon be searching for a sharp knife with which to slit your wrists. Many of your orchids that could have been protected by either moving them into the shade or into your garage or covering them with a bit of shade cloth will be incredibly sunburned and may take years to recuperate, if ever. You will never forgive yourself if this happens, so get off your backside and make sure it doesn't!!
10. Don't be afraid to "think outside the square" for pest control, especially when trying to keep your about-to-flower orchid safe from hungry critters. For years I battled with my stanhopeas in December, spraying the buds daily after the plant had been watered only to have a grasshopper or some other varmint munch a big hole in the side of the flower right before it was due to burst into glorious bloom. Over spraying is not good for either you or your plant, not to mention the environment. Now in December when my stanhopea buds first appear, I attach a kind of upside down shower cap made of curtain netting around the bottom of the hanging basket which protects the buds without any spraying and can also be left on during watering without causing any problems. When the buds open up, I remove the netting and sit back and enjoy the spectacular bug-free flowers. Go ahead and laugh - but I haven't had any stanhopea flowers ruined by any bugs since I thought of the "stan jam" (pyjama) treatment! I also use similar netting around some of my dendrobiums when they are first putting out new growth to keep the bugs off. So what if your spouse or neighbours roll their eyes at you when they see you "dressing up" your orchids, they're not the ones who are devastated when they find a bud with a huge hole in it or a new growth eaten down to nothing.

That's it for my advice, I have to rush off to my club's New Growers' meeting!
Good luck with your orchid collection.

Jan Robinson

Novice grower since 1996 and member of the Sutherland Shire Orchid Society since 2006.

