

## AT HOME WITH ORCHIDS *by Julia Horman*

Orchids are amazing plants! Their family has more than 25,000 species – it's one of the largest flowering plant families in the world and can be found in almost every habitat. They grow in the tropics, inside the Arctic Circle, in the cloud forests of the Andes and, in Maryland woodlands. They live in trees, in the soil, in cracks in the limestone of Ireland's Burren, in conservatories, and in pots on our window sills. If your window sills are empty, now is a good time to think about developing an up-close and personal relationship with one of these beautiful plants. The vendors at our upcoming **FOBG Orchid Show and Sale** will be selling an assortment of orchid species that can adapt to life in our homes. Local orchid enthusiasts from **Rock Creek Orchid Club** will be displaying their plants, too. RCOG members will be happy to talk with you about their plants and the growing techniques that have worked best for them.

Before you purchase your first orchids, take a few minutes to assess your in-home growing conditions.



Note the physical features of your site, whether it's a windowsill, light rack, or sunroom. How much space do you have available for orchids? What light exposures do you have? What temperature ranges do you maintain in the house? You might even think about your favorite bloom colors and shapes. It's hard to go wrong starting out with "the moth orchids"– *Phalaenopsis* or the hybrid *Doritaenopsis*. Although these orchids bloom only once a year, their flowers will last for months.

In addition to *Phalaenopsis*, the FOBG orchid vendors will have other popular choices for in-home growing, including *Paphiopedilum* (lady-slipper orchid), smaller-sized *Cattleya* (old fashion corsage orchid), *Cattleytonia*, and *Dendrobium*. The vendors will help you match your growing conditions to a particular orchid's needs, starting with light and temperature, which may vary depending upon the native environment of the orchid. Buy sensibly – if you always strive for no-maintenance outside gardens, ask about the most durable, least fussy orchid species for in-home growing. If you become impatient with once-a-year bloomers outside, ask about orchids, like the smaller *Cattleyas*, that might bloom more frequently in your house. The vendors may even suggest a winter-bloomer and a summer-bloomer to help extend the period of interest.



Experienced orchid growers are hoping to see some new and unusual plants for sale. Last year, I found the sequentially blooming *Paphiopedilum liemianum*, which flowered from March until July. I also purchased a *Dendrobium* named "Little Sweet Scent" with blooms that smell like raspberry, and a *Cymbidium* named "Mad Irishman." I couldn't resist a plant with such a great name. Although this *Cymbidium* is described as miniature, it's almost too big for my plant room. Some outstanding plants, like the *Cymbidium* and *Vanda*, may be too large or demanding for a novice grower or those of us without greenhouses, but we can enjoy seeing them in Brookside Gardens' conservatories.



The following generalizations about orchid care, which are based on my experience, may be a useful starting point for beginners:

**Light** –Orchids that are generally recommended for in-home growing do not need direct sunlight; east or west facing windows, or south facing windows with sheer curtains, usually work. Orchids grow well on

light racks with florescent bulbs. My *Cattleya* hybrids enjoy spending the summer outside in dappled shade.

**Temperature** – The orchid species mentioned above will be happy with daytime range of 70 - 85° F and nighttime 62 - 68° F. A minimum of 10° night time drop in temperature for several weeks in the fall should help to trigger bloom.

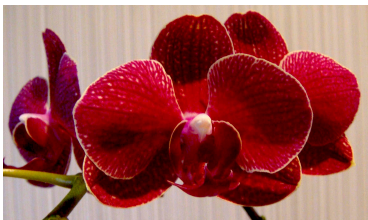
**Humidity** – Orchids prefer 50% or higher humidity; if your house is very dry, you can grow your orchids on special humidity trays with rocks or a rack in the tray to ensure that the bottom of the orchid pot is not sitting in water.

**Water** – Here's my weekly watering/testing routine: water small 2-4" pots weekly; test larger pots, especially > 8", and any pots with a moss growing medium before watering – if a pot feels heavy and/or the medium is damp to the touch, wait until the next week to water; try to water early in the day; avoid getting water in the leaf crown of *Phalaenopsis*. You could also test the pots using a thin wooden dowel inserted to 2" – if it comes out feeling damp, delay watering. If you use that testing method, don't forget to disinfect the dowel regularly. I water all my orchids at a sink to allow a complete flushing of the pot and planting medium. Remember that most orchids do not like to sit in water; make sure that their pots have good drainage. If the orchid is placed in a non-draining decorative pot, always remove the orchid before watering and let it drain thoroughly before replacing it in the non-draining pot. *Phalaenopsis* and *Paphiopedilum* like to be a bit on the damp side; *Cattleyas* like to dry out between watering.



**Fertilizing** – Potted orchids need feeding while in active growth – use a balanced (e.g., 10-10-10) made-for-orchids fertilizer every 2 weeks in summer and every 3 weeks in spring and fall. Try to stay with that timing; you can dilute the manufacturers' recommended amounts. You might consider a switch to the 'bloom booster' 10-15-10 formula for your fall feedings.

**Re-potting** – Do not *let this requirement intimidate you!* In order to keep your plants healthy and blooming well, they should be repotted every other year. Special orchid potting mediums are available at local nurseries, box stores and on-line. Re-potting can be a DIY project, or you might prefer using the services offered at local nurseries and at FOBG's annual Orchid Show and Sale. You should be able to find some guidance from members of Rock Creek Orchid Club and other local organizations, or just ask a friend who grows orchids for some help.



**After-bloom care of *Phalaenopsis*** – when the last bloom fades cut back the flowering spike to about one inch. Continue your watering-feeding routine as the plant rests up for next year. After a few months, you should see a new leaf forming in the leaf crown; you may also notice some new roots developing at the base of the plant. The roots will be pale gray. It's okay to have some roots growing above the planting medium. In late fall, start watching for a new flowering spike – at first the spike may look like another root emerging, but soon you'll notice that the spike is green, more pointed and upward growing than the new roots.

With a little care, you too enjoy your orchid for years. I have been growing orchids in my house for about 23 years and I'm happy to say that some of my earliest acquisitions are still flourishing.