

## ORCHIDS IN THE GARDEN

We regularly encounter the opinion that orchids must be grown in shadehouses and that they cannot be grown in the garden. As most orchids grow on trees, rocks and dry limbs in the wild, we must assume that we can have them in similar situations in our gardens.

One of the most important cultural hints that I have learnt about orchids is that we must attempt to imitate their natural habitat when growing them on. Orchids that naturally grow high up in trees should be placed as close as possible to that position in your garden. Those that grow on rock, exposed to harsh sunlight should not be placed on a branch in a shady part of your garden. etc. etc.

Orchids come, broadly speaking in two types: Those that grow in the earth (terrestrial) and those that grow on limbs, rocks etc (epiphytes). Most orchid growers are interested in the latter type. To grow them successfully and to flower them, we must try to place them onto a growing medium that corresponds with their natural growing situation.

As we cannot always find the fork of a tree or a slab of rock that is suitable, orchid people have developed various combinations of materials that act as effective substitutes for the natural habitat. These include: Pine bark of various sizes, charcoal, sphagnum moss, peat moss, volcanic rock, perlite, vermiculite, absorbastone and other silica based products, clay pebbles and even road gravel. Whether one uses these depends on availability, price, your local situation and growing techniques (watering, shade, housing etc.)

Most orchid growers have tried a range of cultural practices before they have decided on one that works for them. Variables including the amount of water you apply, how you arrange your fertilising program, whether you receive good sunlight in your location and hence what quantity of shade you receive as well as your general climatic conditions all combine to determine what your cultural practices should be.

Generally speaking, orchids require the following:

- a. Good air movement
- b. Regular watering- with an adequate drying out between watering
- c. A humid environment
- d. A suitable growing medium.
- e. Some fertiliser- This should be something with a balanced N.P.K.
- f. Shade as required by the plant.
- g. Protection against all types of insect pests.

Some orchids naturally grow in areas of seasonal rain eg *Den bigibbum*. Such orchids require a period of no or very little water. They are often referred to as 'wet/ dry orchids'. Such plants require loads of water and food during the October—February period with minimal moisture in the balance of the year. If you continue to water them all year round you will either kill or severely set the plant back and most probably will not obtain any flowers. It's a case of being cruel to achieve results.

Whilst fertilising is important, the habitat / moisture consideration is of greater influence in flowering of orchids as without sufficient light and moisture or the necessary cold or dry snap etc the plants will not set flower spikes. If we can imitate the conditions that the plant needs to make it flower, we can expect to flower our orchids around our gardens.

One point we must not forget is that we should NEVER, NEVER, plant epiphytic orchids into soil. This growing medium will lead to root rot and plant death in almost every case.

On many occasions we speak to people who tell us about the orchid they have that receives no special treatment but flowers every year. They invariably wish to know what to do with it. My standard answer is "Nothing". As if the plant is growing and flowering regularly, why change the status quo? Invariably the results will be disastrous if any change is made. My one exception here would be insect control to ensure that, when flowering occurs, the blooms are not chewed to pieces.

## **TYPES OF ORCHIDS SUITED FOR OUR LOCATION**

There are numerous orchid types that we could try in our gardens. Some of these are listed below together with a brief summary of their growing conditions.

**Vanda, Ascocenda & hardcane Dendrobiums:** These are some of the orchids which like to be hung (pretending that they are in trees) in the orchid house. Their roots may grow out of the pots. The vanda group, or alliance, is often grown in hanging baskets and likes plenty of water, especially in warm weather. (Watering around the roots and lower plant will assist in preventing fungal attacks to the new growth in the upper parts of the plant. Hardcane dendrobiums hate the cold and will drop buds and flowers if they feel too cold.

Vandas, particularly do well if hung in the garden with good morning sun and afternoon shade. Constant monitoring and spraying to combat the dendrobium beetle will ensure that flowers are not chewed.

**Cattleya Alliance orchids:** These are happiest in pot on a bench. They like their pots to be just a little too big for their root systems and they like to dry out between watering. I have a number of Cattleyas in large pots, sitting on besser bricks etc in shaded areas in my garden and they flower quite well. Again chewing pest management is a must.

**Cymbidiums:** These are also happy in pots on a bench or under a tree. They prefer their potting mix finer than most other orchids. Cymbidiums like cool weather and may even need cold weather - not frosts- to initiate flowering. This may be achieved by either watering around 4am during December & January or by pouring iced water over the plants on ten to twelve occasions in December. In nature, cymbidiums grow in hollow parts of trees and send their roots down through the decayed wood. Cymbidiums are one of the few orchids which tolerate slow release fertiliser in their media. They should be watered just before they dry out.

**Softcane Dendrobiums:** These lose their leaves before they flower in spring. They must not be watered between Anzac Day and Melbourne Cup day or they will not flower in the spring. They will produce plantlets where the flowers should be. Softcanes like their pots just the right size to fit their root system. Some of our Softcane growers actually take their plants out of the shadehouse in winter and hang them in a breezy, semi-shaded area with no watering to shock them into reproduction cycle.

**Australian Native Orchids:** These are chiefly Dendrobiums and Sarcochilus. The Dendrobiums come from a great variety of environments but, generally speaking they will flower quite well if given morning sunlight and afternoon protection. They need good air movement around their roots and watering once they have dried out. Some prefer to be grown on slabs of bark, cork or tree fern but most can be effectively grown in a mixture of bark and charcoal (4 to 1). They maybe tied to branches or forks of trees using old panty hose and backed with a little peat or sphagnum moss. *Den kingianum* or 'pink rock orchid' does well in trays from under pots (either clay or plastic) provided they have holes

drilled in them. *Sarcochilus* come from the cooler climes and naturally grow in cool shady nooks. They do quite well here if placed in heavier shade with good air movement and regular watering. They seem to have a growth period in autumn & winter and flower in spring.

**Epidendrum:** These are commonly known as crucifix orchids. They are one of the few that will grow in an open, well drained soil/ compost mix. They come in a wide range of colours and make an ideal addition to most gardens, either growing directly in the ground or in large pots.

**Oncidiums:** Several of these 'Dancing Lady' orchids will do well in the garden. *Onc. sphacelatum* has done very well in our garden, commencing at the base of a *Leptospermum Brachyandrum*. The tree was later cut off at about 1.5 metres when it became too large for the situation. We felt that the orchid would then suffer as a result of over exposure to the sun. It has thrived and last year bore 60 flower spikes, each of which had around 100 to 150 flowers.

**Brassias:** These are a plant that is similar to the *Oncidium* and will thrive in the correct position in the garden.

**Zygopetalum:** These plants produce a lovely flower and will do well in conditions similar to those provided for the *Cymbidiums*.

## **SUMMARY**

There is no reason to prevent you flowering orchids in your garden. Some points to keep in mind are:

1. Always try to find out the natural environment of the orchid- its peculiar needs for growth and flowering. Then endeavour to place the plant where it will get as nearly as possible to these needs.
2. Do not over water — most orchids like to dry out between watering. Over watering is probably the greatest killer of orchid plants.
3. Water early in the day in sunlight unless you are early morning watering your *cymbidiums*.
4. Concentrate more on general environment than on fertilising.
5. Use a balanced fertiliser approx N.P.K. 20:5:10 at regular intervals throughout the year.
6. Remember that morning sunlight and afternoon shelter are generally required by all orchids.
7. Ensure that good air movement is available for most. This not only dries out the plants after a good watering but also keeps fungal spores on the go.
8. Don't be afraid to hang pots of *vandas*, *ascocendas* and even *cattleyas*.
9. Never pot into soil.
10. Use a bark and charcoal potting mix which is available from most orchid nurseries. Perlite added to the mix aids aeration.
11. *Vandas* like coarse mix while the finer/ smaller *Aust. Natives* do well in fine to medium bark & charcoal.
12. The Lemon Scented Tea Tree is a great host. Some orchid growers use it as a hospital ward to resurrect ailing plants.
13. Constant care should be maintained to control, slugs & snails, cockroaches, aphids, chewing insects. Carbaryl is effective on *dendrobium* beetles and grasshoppers.