

DIABLO VIEW ORCHID SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER EXCERPTS

May, July, August 1999

Orchid Culture Tips and Comments, Part I

by Dave Altman

First let me say that these comments are basically directed toward the 'rank amateur' collector and enthusiast.

I've been growing orchids for some 35 years and basically doing an overall bad job of it. Greenhouses and controlled environments have always been a dream and remain so even now. I've succeeded in killing many an orchid either through improper care or just lack of proper environment. As a result I've become, like so many other orchid lovers before me, a practitioner of the GOD method of orchid horticulture. Basically the plant Grows Or Dies. Hopefully if it grows it will also bloom. Here are some comments about growing orchids that I've learned over the years. Please remember, these comments are basically for people like myself that grow orchids in un-controlled areas.

Do you grow cactus? Do you also kill cactus? Do your cactus survive as well as your orchids? If you are killing your cactus odds are you are also killing your orchids. Ever wonder why? Both cactus and orchids grow in very harsh environments. One plant went into the desert, and the other went into the trees. Both have solved their problem by water storage ability. The number one method used to kill cactus and orchids is....water. Or to be more exact, too much water. Learn to be cruel without practicing 'Chinese water torture'. Orchids and cactus both don't like to be dripped on for the most part, so unless you can be sure water will dry quickly, water the root area and not the plant itself.

If you need to bring the plants indoors during the winter be sure to get a small fan to move air around the plants. Humidity trays help a lot to overcome the effects of forced air heating. If your house is dark (like mine) look for a small grow light in a clamping fixture to supplement natural light from any windows. Will it be enough light? Probably not, but any little bit will help over the winter months.

During the winter try extra hard not to water the plants. Some don't want water at all, and some that do want only a little. Try to learn which do and which don't. Most amateur growers, like myself, kill most of our plants during winter and early spring.

As much as we all love the challenge of taking a small seedling plant and growing it to maturity and bloom I have found the best approach is to spend the extra \$5-10 and get a more mature plant. Leave the seedlings to those that have that beautiful greenhouse. If you have no choice, sure, go ahead and get that seedling for \$5-9, and if a mature plant is \$50 one should also consider (go for it) the seedling, but remember the success rate is much, much lower. (and who knows, maybe that plant will be the one that grows like a weed just for you.)

One of the more recent trends by growers is to import plants from the far east which have been grown on a piece of coir. This plant is then planted into a rather deep pot because they want to hide that big chunk of coir. So what happens to you as the buyer? Well first of all you stick your finger into the media to see if it is moist. Gee, it sure feels dry, think I'll water it. Now for those of you that have studied your AOS magazines you will remember that coir retains water at a rate like 5x that of fir bark. So what you have now is wetted bark and a soaking wet chunk of coir which is happily rotting the roots. Well, can't we

remove the coir? One of the nice things about coir is that not only do the roots grow around it, but most actually grow through it. Remove the coir, and remove the roots too! What a happy plant. The only suggestion I have is repot smaller and hold back watering a whole lot because that coir will stay moist a long, long time. To tell if it is dry lift the plant, if it feels light wait till tomorrow to water. Oh, almost forgot. Coir = coconut husk.

Orchid Culture Tips and Comments, Part II

by Dave Altman

Due to the over whelming comments I received (yeah, right) from my first issue of comments and tips I've decided to add a part II concerning how the amateur can use the G-O-D method of orchid culture to improve their ability to cultivate orchids. (G-O-D method usually means 'Grow Or Die')

One of the most basic problems of an amateur collector is how to give their orchids the proper conditions under which to bloom. Amateurs like myself have found that our orchids would sometimes grow, and if we were lucky the plant would grow like a weed. Note that I said grow, not bloom. I have one plant that's been growing for some 35 years. I've bloomed it maybe 7-8 times, mostly by sheer luck. So what has to change? Usually I can never give my orchids all three proper environmental conditions. I don't have a greenhouse. There was always something missing. If I had light, I didn't have the humidity. If I had humidity I won't have enough light. My worst control element would be temperature. Try giving orchids very bright light in Walnut Creek/Concord and cool conditions at the same time during the summer. Ever see moss grow outdoors during our summers? So basically I just gave up, threw all my orchids outside under a shade cloth tent. Grow Or Die. Guess what, most grew, and some even started to bloom. What did I do right? So here is some of what I learned:

- 1. To get many varieties of orchids to bloom one needs to give them a hard temperature change. I have summer temp. variances from 105-55 deg.F from midday to dawn. That's a little drastic but that is one thing you can't do if you have your orchids in the house. (if you could live with orchids in that range fragrance may take on another meaning)
- 2. Try to give the plants some humidity by using trays filled with rocks and some water, or find some commercially avail. humidity trays. For those really hot days get a misting nozzle and mist the area heavily early in the morning. No, you won't get greenhouse conditions, but orchids are usually pretty tough plants and if they can survive on a twig in thin air what's to say your garden can be worse? My orchids are within 10ft of my cactus collection.
- 3. Learn not to over water orchids even when they are outdoors in the DVOS area. Most plants can do well if watered every 4-5 days even in the middle of summer. Some plants can go 6-7 days. If the canes start to shrivel a little then increase the watering frequency for just those plants. You may be surprised to actually see the canes swell up as they grow (now the orchid is doing its thing).
- 4. Water the plants well BEFORE you fertilize. Wait 2-3 hrs before you feed. If this isn't possible due to schedule, etc. then save the plant by cutting way back on the concentration of the fertilizer. Make up the fertilizer at 1/2 recommended strength. (that's most likely 1/16 tsp/gal. - best way is to make up 1 gal. normally and dilute again at 4:1) Then feed a little more frequently, maybe weekly.
- 5. Try different situations. If the plant does nada here, move it there. (It may still do nada but...) Leaves look nice and dark green? Move the plant somewhere a little brighter. Make up some different light zones. If bringing the plant from indoors to outdoors, give the plant a little more initial shade, you can always try burning the leaves later.
- 6. Learn what temps. each plant likes. If the plant is a warm/intermediate grower it should be ok outdoors in summer. If it is a cool grower, like a Masdevallia, keep the plant indoors in the coolest spot in the house with a window. In some cases just give up and don't get the plant at all unless one likes the D in the G-O-D method.
- 7. Don't expect your plants to look like they are greenhouse cultured, be happy that they grow and maybe bloom.

- **8. If you win the lotto, build a nice greenhouse.**

Cultural Sidebar:

Sometimes an amateur grower can actually cultivate a difficult to grow orchid better than the greenhouse grower. Why? Because some orchids really like it mean, so mean in fact that those conditions are hard to duplicate in a greenhouse, but not to people that practice the G-O-D method.

Orchid Culture Tips and Comments, Part III

by Dave Altman

Some more tips for the amateur orchid grower.

Often orchid collectors find themselves in a position of getting a new plant and not knowing what to do with it culturally. Does the plant like a lot of light? Does the plant want to be kept moist or dry? Is it a heavy feeder or will it grow better on air alone? Even some experienced growers can make errors because no matter how well one knows a particular genus, there always maybe that one exception. As an amateur this condition often leads to a dead plant. So what should one do?

RULE #1 (mild to warm weather conditions)

- 1. If you're going to make a watering mistake, make the mistake on the dry side. If the plant seems dry then give it a light watering and let it go somewhat dry again.
- 2. Continue this watering regimen without feeding the plant.
- 3. Observe the plant. This should take about a month or two. Pay particular attention to the pseudo-bulbs.
- 4. If the bulbs continue to stay fat then your watering regimen is most likely ok. However, if one notices that the bulbs are showing signs of shriveling that would be a sure indication that the plant is using it's reserves of water to maintain itself. Start watering more frequently and continue to observe.
- 5. If the bulbs start to fill out again, and the plant is otherwise responding well continue to use the more frequent watering schedule. One can now also initiate a feeding schedule using " the recommended dosage.

What would have happened if the opposite were true? The plant didn't want much water and there you were watering away. The first thing you might notice is that the pseudo-bulb has started to turn a little lighter in shade, maybe a little brownish too? Then you would have done the next thing, squeezed it a little. Sort of soft? Some things like to be squeezed and be soft but orchids aren't one of them. Now that's a rotten situation, at least for the plant.

RULE #2

- 1. Are you going to put the plant in that real, real sunny spot for a bit of color?-- Don't.
- 2. Find an area with medium light exposure, or a least somewhere where your skin doesn't feel warm.
- 3. Can you look at where the sun is without going blind? If you could go blind, imagine that plant with eyes.
- 4. If the plant starts to grow in the direction of brighter light, then by all means move it toward the brighter area and watch the leaves. If the leaves begin to feel hot to the touch or start showing lighter spots then move the plant back away from the brighter light.

Rule #3

- 1. Ever get a plant with peanuts in the bottom and the media seems super tight and stuck together?
- 2. Unless the plant is in bloom repot as soon as possible. Try to really minimize watering because that media is a give-away that the root area has poor aeration. Many of these plants have been grown in a high

humidity area and the watering was minimal with the plant depending on humid air for moisture.

- 3. Use a loose media mix so air can get to the root zone and allow the plant to recover and adjust to your environment.

CULTURAL SIDEBAR: The pseudo bulbs usually have an exterior sheath that dries out and can be used by insects to hide in. The usual recommendation is to remove these sheaths so bugs can't hide in them. The one thing it does do however is shade the bulb from the sun. Care should be given to these bulbs as you move the plant into sunnier areas as the pseudo bulbs may have a tendency to burn before the leaves show signs of burning.

POTS

From lots of past experience I've found that pots in general could be best described as 'orchid coffins'. I think I've lost track of how many times I've waffled between a clay pot or using a plastic pot. To be honest - I still don't know. Often I wonder if professional growers even know what to use.

Here are a few pointers I've found:

1. Know yourself. I know that sounds really zennish, yogaish or something like that, but what I mean is think about the way you like to treat plants. If you are that bleeding heart type of grower that just loves to coddle a plant most likely you are also the type of grower that would drown an orchid, rot it through and through. Maybe in that case a clay pot would be better since it has a tendency to dry the media more quickly. You won't kill the plant as quickly.
2. Do you travel a lot or can you spend a lot of time with that plant? If you are gone a lot then maybe the plastic pot would be safer since it will retain that moisture longer while you are away finding replacement plants in Belize. If you are around to check the plant twice daily then go for the clay pot just in case you lose control of your arm as it reaches for the watering can.
3. Holes. Lots and lots of holes. No matter what type of pot you use the plant will benefit from holes in the sides and bottom of the pot. This improves air circulation to the plant's roots, lowers the tendency to rot the roots, and generally makes the plant a happy camper. With clay pots one is pretty much limited to opening the drain hole in the bottom of the pot. I've used a masonry bit and also drilled holes in the bottom of the pots. A small hammer can also be used to knock out a larger drain hole. For plastic pots use a medium sized soldering gun to melt holes in the bottom and sides of the pot. One can also make slits in the sides of plastic pots with the soldering gun if you are careful and move the tip slowly along the side of the pot.
4. Depending on the plant use the shallowest pot available. Shallower pots have a tendency to dry faster, especially near the bottom of the pot. I've had plants in pots where I could stick my finger down 2-3" and it would be dry, but the plant rotted because if I went down a few more inches I ran into wet mud. Wet mud = rotten roots (usually).
5. Recently I've been experimenting with clear plastic pots. The nice thing about clear pots is you can see how your repotting effort has succeeded. You can see the voids if any and you can see the moisture in the pot. If there is condensation on the pot wall you don't need to water. This is also a training tool in learning good watering habits.