

Some Orchid Basics

What Kind Of Orchid Is This And What Do I Do With It?

When you first find that perfectly formed orchid that says *buy me*, and bring it home, how do you know how to care for it? Well, even if you can't pronounce the botanical name on the tag – or more frustratingly, don't have any tag at all, you can still figure out what most orchids need with a little bit of trial and error. They aren't all fussy primadonas, as their reputation can lead you to expect, and you don't need a four year degree in botanical Latin or a thesaurus to understand what all the technical language means.

The Technical Mumbo Jumbo:

Most orchids are native to tropical areas of the world and grow on the sides of trees. This growth habit means they are *epiphytes*. Some orchids grow naturally in very loose and well drained soils and this growth habit is described as *terrestrial*. Still other orchids grow naturally on rocks, making them *lithophytes*. When growing orchids in pots, most orchid soil mixes start with chunks of bark and add varying amounts of moss, perlite, and charcoal for their quick draining properties.

Regardless of how or where orchids grow naturally, they rarely sit in water. Water goes flowing by thick roots, and they grab whatever nutrients and moisture they require and store it, either in thickened growths below the leaves (called *pseudobulbs*) or in their thick, fleshy leaves. These types of orchids only need watering about once a week and prefer a coarse potting mix so the water may drain quickly. Orchids with finer root systems and less camel-like ways of storing water and nutrients need more frequent watering and a finer potting mix that holds more water.

There are two patterns of growth in orchids. As they age, orchids with those thick pseudobulbs will make new ones beside older pseudobulbs. (If you were to take pictures of the plant over several years and then view them in order, like a flip book, the orchid would almost appear to be walking!) Orchids with this type of growth habit are described as *sympodial*. They can be divided between the pseudobulbs and repotted – allowing enough space in their new pots for your orchids to take a year long stroll.

Other orchids grow upwards, making new leaves above older, mature ones. These types of orchids are described as *monopodial*. Monopodial orchids can not be divided and when repotting them into fresh soil mix, you can use the same size container.

Lighting:

When orchid care instructions tell you to put your new plant in low light conditions, this means an eastern window or indirect, filtered, or morning light from a southern or western window. Medium light means unfiltered morning light, whether an eastern, southern, or western window. High light conditions are found easiest in a southern window. Most orchids requiring high light will not appreciate the hot (drying) direct sun of a western window. You can still keep your orchid in a room with only western windows – the trick is to adjust the distance between your plant and the window, and/or providing a filter (like sheer curtains) to the direct afternoon sun.

Northern windows are not beneficial for orchids – there just isn't enough light. A way around this dilemma, is to provide supplemental lighting in the form of full-spectrum LED grow lights, held about 6 inches above the leaves of your orchids.

A general guideline for the right amount of light is that the leaves of your orchid should be a grassy green color – not a dark green or bleached out. Remember, just because your orchid is still alive in very low light, doesn't mean it's going to flower there. Move it around every month or so until you find a spot where it really seems to thrive.

Temperatures:

When the care tag for your orchid says to provide warm temperatures, this means a comfortable room temperature during the day (68° F or higher – but never warmer than 85° F) and night temps no lower than 60° F. Intermediate temperature requirements mean in the 60s during the day and the 50s at night. Orchids that need cool temps prefer days at least 55° F or more, with nights in the 40s.

These basic guidelines are really more focused on the minimum night temperatures than the day temperatures (so long as you don't exceed about 85° F). For the best blooming success, orchids need to see night temperatures at least 10° F lower than day temps for several weeks. If your orchid has the right lighting, but still doesn't flower for you – make sure it experiences this drop in temperature at night for a while, particularly in the autumn.

Watering & Fertilizer:

Orchids do not get much nutrients from their native habitat, and you should try to mimic that in your home. Use a fertilizer specifically formulated for orchids (instead of a bloom booster or one meant for outdoor bedding plants), and provide it “weakly,

weekly” – small amounts, often. Even monthly doses of fertilizer are beneficial. Be sure to flush the orchids with plain water a few times each year to get rid of any salts that accumulated from the fertilizer.

When you water your orchid, it’s supposed to drain right through the potting mix. Orchids still love humidity though, so keep them away from dry drafts (like from air conditioners, or electrical equipment that’s in use, or from the heat register) and set the pot on top of a tray filled with pebbles (or decorative glass) and water. (Remember that orchids do not like to sit in water!) The water in the pebble tray will increase the air humidity around your orchid as it evaporates.

If you really want to give your orchids a treat, move them outside for the summer. Start in dappled, indirect sunlight and slowly move them to an area with more light, still avoiding sunburn. All that fresh air, rain water, and natural light is like a vacation for them.

Pest Inspection & Control:

Check the undersides of leaves and any nooks & crannies on your orchid plant several times every year (especially before you bring them indoors in late summer!). What you’re looking for are little brown scales, pale green aphids, white cotton-like mealybugs, or flying whiteflies. Orchids are usually resistant to such invaders, but if you do find some unwelcome guests on your plant, use houseplant insecticidal soap (*always* follow the directions on any pesticide, no matter how safe for people or animals) and thoroughly coat the plant and allow it to soak into the pot.

The Confusing Part or What the heck does *that* mean?

Suppose the tag that came with your orchid reads something like: *Brsa.* Orange Delight ‘Starbek’, HCC/AOS. Now how do you tell your friend from Texas what kind of plant you just bought on your trip to Maine?

Well, the italicized abbreviation at the beginning, *Brsa.*, stands for *Brassada* which is the genus name for a genetic cross between an orchid in the genus *Ada* and one in the genus *Brassia*.

The next part of the name on the tag, Orange Delight, refers to a specific hybrid cross, in this case, the parent plants were *Ada aurantiaca* and *Brassia* Mary Traub Leven. (Yes, that second parent is itself a cross, and tracing the parentage of orchids gets *very*

confusing. Don't let your eyes cross just yet, there's a point to this section of the article – I promise!)

The third part of the name, which is in quotation marks, 'Starbek', refers to exactly one cultivar (or cultivated variety) from the cross of *Ada aurantiaca* and *Brassia* Mary Traub Leven. Any given orchid seed pod produces millions of seeds. When orchid breeders grow these seeds and decide they really like a single plant, it gets its very own name, in this case 'Starbek'.

The alphabet soup at the end of our example refers to the different awards this specific plant has won. HCC/AOS means this plant was awarded a Highly Commended Certificate by the American Orchid Society – that's like 3rd place. First place is FCC (First Class Certificate) and second place is AM (Award of Merit). It's kind of like tacking the abbreviation of your degree to the end of your name after you graduate college.

So now that you can decipher the name on the tag, why did you want to in the first place? This long and somewhat complicated name is specific to a single plant. When you go to a store in Texas and buy a plant with this same name, it will be the same plant as the one you bought in Maine: same colors, same patterns, same everything.

Just to add to the confusion, some orchids will have several different names. This is because the people who decide these things have changed their minds and rearranged the different species names. It makes life complicated for orchid breeders and confusing to novice orchid growers, but doesn't affect first time orchid growers a bit!

The Escape Clause:

Orchids are tough plants that need little care, yet still bloom abundantly in the home. This does not mean every orchid will be a perfect fit for your space. When you've tried your best to get an orchid to thrive and blossom, but you just don't succeed, it is OK to send it off to botanical heaven. Just don't give up on all orchids – with the thousands of different cultivars available, there *must* be one that *is* perfect for you. Happy growing!

This article was created with the help of a great little book called [Bloom-Again Orchids: 50 Easy-Care Orchids That Flower Again And Again And Again](#) by judywhite. It's a really easy to understand primer for orchids. When the author's bio says "she is proud to say she has killed orchids on both sides of the Atlantic", you know you're in good hands!