

## Orchid Basics Notes (by Stephanie Burns)

Believe it or not, orchids are the second best-selling potted plant in America. As exotic as these plants look, many of them are not difficult to grow indoors. Some remain in bloom for many months and should certainly satisfy a winter gardening urge. Just choose orchids that are well suited to your home environment. Following are some basic considerations from Santa Fe orchid grower **Ron Midgett**.

**Light** is probably the most critical concern, so be sure to choose plants that are suited to your home's specific light conditions. *Paphiopedilum* and *Phalaenopsis* types prefer low light (about 2 hours of weak sun directly on the leaves) while *Oncidiums* like moderate lighting conditions (3-4 hours of bright sun). *Cattleyas* and *Dendrobiums* thrive in strong light. However, too much light can scorch an orchid's leaves, especially here in New Mexico. Leaf color is a good indicator of light conditions. When light is optimal leaves are pale to medium green, while deep lush green leaves signal insufficient light.

**Temperature** is another important factor. Orchids grow and bloom better with a daytime and nighttime temperature differential. Most commonly grown orchids require moderate night temperatures between 55 and 65 degrees.

**Watering** instructions for orchids usually stipulate a thorough watering and then allowing the plant to go almost dry, a practice which prevents root rot. But there are exceptions, such as *Paphiopedilum*, which should never dry out completely and prefers water about twice a week. Also, orchids don't like hard water.

**Humidity** can be maintained by simply placing orchid pots in saucers or trays of gravel filled with water. Just make sure to position the pots on the gravel so that water doesn't wick into the potting medium. Special grid-topped trays are also available, eliminating the need for gravel.

**Fertilizing** on a consistent basis is a must for all orchids. A 20-20-20 all-purpose food will probably meet most needs, but the specific orchid type should really dictate the feeding regimen.

**Repotting** is a critical part of orchid maintenance and is usually done no more than once every year or two. Reasons for repotting include the plant getting top heavy; its roots filling up most of the available growing space; or the potting medium breaking down. The potting medium Ron Midgett

recommends is Orchiata, a New Zealand pine bark available in several grades, as well as New Zealand Sphagnum Moss.

**Pests** are best kept in check with a simple solution of 70% rubbing alcohol and 30% dormant oil. This solution will take care of mealy bugs, scale and aphids. Just remember that it's a contact spray so applications must be repeated.