

ORCHID CARE IN WINTER

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As the weather cools down it is time to start preparing your plants for the winter season. Not all orchids require the same culture but they can generally be sorted into genera that have similar requirements so it is a good idea to group these together in your growing area. As you go through your collection examine each plant thoroughly to ensure it is free from pests and weeds. Clean up any infected plant and remove any dead bracts that can be a hiding place for pests. Remember to repeat the treatment in 7 – 10 days to ensure that any eggs that may have escaped the initial treatment have also been eradicated.

There are quite a few genera that are dormant in winter. Some, such as the *Calanthe*, *Stenoglottis*, *Thunia* or *Pleione*, are deciduous and lose all their leaves so that tells you they do not need water or fertiliser. Just the occasional mist should be all they need. Other orchids are semi deciduous and as they start to shed their leaves it signals time for you to reduce watering and stop fertilising. Among these are the softcane and some hard cane dendrobiums. These orchids need a dry period to initiate flowering. Other orchids, including those that flower in winter such as *Cymbidium*, *Zygopetalum* or *Laelia anceps* or those that do not have water storage in the form of pseudobulbs such as *Phalaenopsis*, *Sarcochilus* or *Paphiopedilum*, will require water all year though often much less than in spring and summer. Orchids deprived of air spaces around their roots because the media is constantly wet and soggy will quickly succumb.

The onset of cooler temperatures and the seasonal changes in different day/night lengths are triggers for many orchids to start their flowering cycle so it is important to know something of your orchid's natural environment (or its parents/ancestral origins if it's a hybrid). Not all orchids from the tropics can be treated the same. Some may be from monsoonal regions where they will go for many months without any rain. Others will grow in areas where rainfall is spread throughout the year. Parts of the tropics have high mountains and the orchids from these areas will require quite different cultural conditions from those at sea level. Perhaps one of the most critical aspects of winter orchid care is getting the watering (or lack of it) right.

Watering is governed by many things including:

- where you grow your orchids – indoors, outside, in a shadehouse, in a glasshouse, etc;
- what potting media you use;
- the weather; but, most importantly
- the cultural requirements of the orchid itself.

The importance of understanding the needs of orchids by researching their natural habitat is fundamental and, with the wealth of books and published material as well as the internet and fellow members of the orchid society available, it is fairly easy to do.

When I sort and group my orchids for winter I use a red coloured tag to clearly identify those orchids that must be given a rest and kept dry. As they are all in a group in a corner of the shadehouse it is a simple matter to avoid giving them too much water though they do get a daily mist.

A speaker at a workshop I attended many years ago stressed, "Cold water does do harm!" and since then I have added a bucket of hot water to my 60 litre water bin in the shadehouse to take the icy chill off before I water in winter. Another time worn saying that is worth remembering and heeding is, "More orchids die through overwatering than underwatering. If in doubt, leave it another day." This is a really important maxim in winter orchid care.

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