

New Year's Resolutions for Orchid Growers

#1 – No overwatering

Well behaved houseplants tell us when they need more water by drooping slightly. They look dry and sometimes a little crinkly. Let them go too long without water and they will keel over (and, alas, sometimes die). When they begin to droop, the attentive grower gives them water and sees them perk right up.

Orchids, unfortunately, are often perverse: they droop slightly, get a crinkly surface, often with grooves running the length of the leaves, when they get too much water. Just the opposite of the expectations most of us have for well-behaved plants. Our natural inclination, based on experience, is to add water. For orchids, this course can be deadly. Literally.

The reason is the way orchid roots are put together. In order to survive exposed to the humid, wet then dry and windy atmosphere they prefer, most orchids have an adaptation in the roots which helps them finely regulate the amount of moisture they take in. The outer cells of the root have evolved to sponge up water. And, just like the old sponge that is left wet in a dank place, the orchid roots will rot away. Continuously putting water into the orchid's pot is the surest way to create the conditions for the dead-sponge effect. Moderate watering in really humid conditions can have the same effect. In either case, damaged and even non-existent roots will result. Of course, the orchid then is not getting water and withers, looking for all the world like a too-dry plant.



What to do? Watering the orchid at this point will be deadly. The remedy is to withhold water, repot into fresh media, and put the plant in a humid environment waiting to begin watering until the new roots begin to show. The best remedy is to avoid overwatering. Take care to let the orchid use the water it has been given before adding more. Put your finger in the mix, if it feels wet, it is. Let the mix dry. Orchids do better too dry than too wet. Every orchid grower will tell you that more plants have been killed off by too much water than any other way.



Seedlings may save money initially, but they can be harder to grow.

#2 – Buy a second, mature, blooming orchid within six months of getting your first.

Both timing and size are important. The timing is to begin to think in terms of having blooms year round. Under normal conditions, most orchids bloom at approximately the same time each year. Most orchid blooms last a nice little while: some hold their blooms for extravagant lengths. This means that by planning your collection, you can enjoy blooms through the seasons.

When you start your collection, don't make the common mistake of buying small. The attraction of small size is expense. It's cheaper to buy a seedling than a mature, blooming plant. There are several problems with this approach in the beginning. The first one is that you may not get exactly the bloom you expected. The pictures which are used to sell an orchid may not correspond well with the way the bloom will look at home. Even with mericlones, which are exact replicas of the original plant, the picture may be an unusually good angle, hiding the imperfections, and, worse, it may be doctored to hide the flaws. Buy something you see in bloom and you know it is exactly what you want.

The second problem is that seedlings are generally more difficult to grow than mature plants. With experience, you will find that orchids are remarkably tolerant plants, easy to grow and, as my aunt would say, "grateful." Seedlings, however, can be a little finicky. Eventually you will want to try your hand at seedlings. In the beginning, however, it will be more rewarding to get mature plants. More expensive but more likely to be rewarding.

#3 – Visit your local American Orchid Society affiliated orchid society.

Your local garden club is likely to have one or two good orchid-growers. Your local American Orchid Society affiliate will have a roomful. It will also have novices, eager to learn. The combination is serendipitous: good growers and eager novices make a great combination. You will see excellently grown plants on the society's plant tables. You will hear interesting and informative talks on an unending array of subjects relating to orchids. Many societies will have local vendors who will offer better and more diverse orchids than your local big-box store. Most importantly, you will have the opportunity to talk to and share experiences with other enthusiasts about the relation of local conditions, like the weather in your area, and really successful growing. You will soon become part of the gang. You can find a listing of local orchid societies on the AOS website [right here](#).

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