St. Augustine Orchid Society
www.staugorchidsociety.org

Orchids in Fall

November 2001

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Orchid Growing Tips

Winter in the temperate zone is alien to most tropical Orchids. For the most part, tropical Orchids experience nearly 12-hour days and nights with only slight differences in day length and or temperature. With the exception of species at the end of the tropical zones or those from high elevations, the most likely seasonal variation many species will experience is that of a wet/dry variation during the year. Remember, for tropical species, dry may simply mean less wet, while in other cases there may be little or no moisture for months in their natural habitat. Failure to recognize this aspect in both species and hybrids leads to either poor growth or death in many Orchids.

If you have graduated to species or have primary hybrids (those made by combining two species), you may find that a little research can lead to much improved growth and flowering in these plants. If you find that the natural habitat offers clear days during winter, take this as a hint that the species requires bright light and less water during that time of the year. Some species are more forgiving than others and so are more common in cultivation, while hybrids have been selected that withstand conditions in greenhouses. There are some common groups of Orchids that respond to simulated, pronounced seasonal change and that give many growers, novice and experienced alike, difficulty.

In Paphs, the diminutive Brachypetalum group (concolor, niveum, etc) grows in limestone outcrops subject to dry periods and rapid drying. In winter, when day length is short and light intensity low, members of the Brachy group must be watered less. This group has thickened leaves that store water. If the root system is intact, let the leaves shrink a little before watering. The same is true of most of the Parvisepalum group; water them less in winter and watch the leaves for a sign that they need water.

Many Cattleyas, including hybrids need to be drier in winter. Increasing light intensity in greenhouses will assist in drying the plant and simulates aspects of their natural environment. Encyclias and other Caribbean species are in the hurricane zone with heavy summer rain ending in late November or early December. For the next six months there is little rain, but high humidity. Sunlight remains relatively intense and days near 12 hours long. Failure to limit water leads to the loss of many Caribbean Orchids in temperate greenhouses each winter.

Under-lights growers have an advantage this time of year as they can more effectively control both day length and light intensity. If you grow hybrid Orchids inside, do not try to replicate the day length here in the Carolinas. Eleven hours of light is a short enough day to convince your plants that they are at home. Depending on the heating system in your home there may even be a need to add humidity to your growing area. Orchids prefer the kind of humidity that people like, about 60%.

Some Orchids grow in habitats that experience little seasonal change. Vandas and Phals will grow great under the same conditions year-round, 65 F at night and 90 F during

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the day. Both of these groups like long days with Phals preferring lower light levels. Remember that standard Phals need large day/night temperature change, and/or lower night temperatures to initiate flowering. After that period of flower spike initiation, these Orchid groups need conditions similar to the warm tropics.

One final warning before winter officially arrives. If you have discovered a few more critters missed before moving plants inside or into the greenhouse, there is still time to spot-treat them on a nice warm afternoon. Some pesticides are not approved for inside the greenhouse and some that simply stink. Move affected plants outside in an area away from pets, children and bright light and treat following directions. The low humidity will help the plant dry and lose at least some of the smell that often accompanies these pesticides. After plants have passed the “no contact period” (see pesticide directions) move them back inside or in the greenhouse and place them where you can watch them during the winter in case some of the beasts survive.