

Master Gardener  
University of California



# The Curious Gardener

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## Orchid-Mania: How to Buy and Care for an Orchid

by Bonnie Bradt, UC Master Gardener of Nevada County

**WARNING:** Collecting orchids can be addictive. Of course since I'm already far down that path, I guess I'm contributing to encouraging future addicts. **GO FOR IT!**

To begin with, there are two main reasons to buy an orchid:

**ONE:** you want a pretty plant with flowers to put on your coffee table or give as a gift. It will last for a few weeks looking great. And then you will toss it. No guilt and not much money. So pick any pretty orchid from anywhere including a grocery store or big box store. You don't need to know what kind it is or how the roots look. Pick one where the flowers have not all opened up and it will last longer. The End.

**TWO:** you are interested in orchids and want to have pretty ones that will grow well and re-bloom, maybe for years. You are willing to put in some time and patience to learn how to care for them. They can still sit on your coffee table when they're blooming but you won't be tossing them. If you have chosen **TWO**, then let's deal with what you need to know to give you a good start.

We will begin with the purchase of a new orchid. You **DO** need to know what type it is. Look for a label of some sort that gives the whole name. Often grocery store or big box store orchids won't have this. But if you know the name, then you will be able to look up special instructions that will be helpful for growing that particular orchid. Each orchid has different requirements. If you know them, you will have much more chance at a successful future for your plant.



*Cymbidium orchids.  
Photo by Bonnie Bradt.*

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Hint... purchase at an orchid show and I guarantee each orchid will be properly labeled. Don't lose the label.

If you want your orchid to last, you DO want to know what the roots look like. Most orchids are potted in see-through plastic pots. That is perfect as you can see the roots' appearance. They should be plump and white or green (depending on whether they are dry or wet). If they are brown or black then they are rotted and will not take up water. Try smelling the root area if you can. Rotted roots will smell rotted... a "dead" giveaway.

Look at the color and condition of the leaves of the plant, not just the flowers. Evenly green, and no misshapen leaves or leaf spots, which could be fungus, virus or insects. If you really want to invest in the future of your collection, and you are patient, buy orchids that are not blooming. You can buy orchids as "juveniles" inexpensively, and have a nice collection to grow and care for. Again, purchasing at an orchid show allows you to buy many types of baby or "not yet flowering" orchids.

In general, most orchids have a growth phase during the warm months and they bloom in the winter months. So you feed them and water them more during the months when they are growing. Makes sense, right? You do not need to feed them when they are flowering. Just water them.

Most people who are first time orchid buyers, will choose one of the three most popular varieties. The "moth" orchid (*Phalenopsis*), the *Cymbidium* orchid, or the lady slipper orchid (*Paphiopedilum*). Mostly they are easy to grow and have a good chance of reblooming if treated right. But they have very different preferences for growth conditions.

The graceful, arching moth orchid, the grocery store favorite, is easy to grow and can bloom for months at a time unless it's already been blooming for a month before you get it. This orchid prefers medium light, medium temperature, and at least 50% humidity during its growth phase.



Moth orchids. *Phalenopsis*. Photo by Bonnie Bradt.



Lady slipper orchid. *Paphiopedilum*.

Photo by Bonnie Bradt.

A day/night temperature difference of 15 degrees in the fall is good for flowering. It is a house plant.

Cymbidiums can also be found in grocery stores. They are tall hardy orchids that can be happy growing outdoors. Usually they should be in tall containers, in bark for drainage and so their roots can stretch. In fact, they actually need a cold chill phase in the fall/early winter, to grow the best flowers. Although I would not advocate this, they will tolerate being snowed on. During their growth phase, they need lots of light (even periods of direct sun although dappled sun is best), lots of water, drainage, fertilizer and that cold chill that I mentioned. Ideally they can be grown outside all year, until they start to bloom. Then you can put them wherever you want to show off the flowers.

The last "beginner friendly" orchid I want to mention is the lady slipper. They are a bit harder to find but are reasonably easy to grow. They do not need a lot of light, but they like humidity. Maybe they'd be a good bathroom orchid.

Of course there are many types of orchids you can try. If you go to an orchid show, you will be literally blinded by the choices. But I suggest that you start with either *Phalenopsis*, *Cymbidium*, or *Paphiopedilum* (or all of them) to experiment with what will tolerate your home's conditions best. You will probably find, as I did, that it is easier to find orchids that like your home, instead of trying to alter your home to please an orchid. Of course if you have a greenhouse, that is the best of all situations.

As passing thoughts for your beginning efforts, here are the **10 "Rules of Thumb" for basic orchid care.**

1. When in doubt, go drought. More orchids have been killed by overwatering than underwatering.
2. Whatever you do, do it before noon. This gives the orchid time to dry before cool night temperature encourages fungus.
3. Air movement and light are as important as water and fertilizer.



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4. Misting can result in more problems than benefits. Humidity is best found by a kitchen sink or in a bathroom (or greenhouse) for the orchids that need it.
5. Water once a week on the average—more in summer, less in winter.
6. Fertilize WEEKLY, WEAKLY. Very dilute fertilizer each time you water. During the flowering phase, it's water only.
7. Use temperate to warm water. Do not water with sodium softened water, but potassium soft water is fine. And remember, orchids are not cocktails, do NOT use ice.
8. If the leaf is warm to the touch, it is in too much light.
9. Sun moves seasonally, so move your plants accordingly.
10. Become an inspector. Observe your plants for the appearance of problems.

One of the new orchid lover's best friends is the website for the American Orchid Society, [www.aos.org](http://www.aos.org) There are "Culture Sheets" for most types of orchid with specific information about that variety. There are suggestions about everything from repotting orchids to pest control.

Lastly, be patient. A true orchid expert is one who has killed many orchids and learned from the mistakes.

## References

- *All About Orchids*. American Orchid Society. 2019. [www.aos.org/orchids.aspx](http://www.aos.org/orchids.aspx)
- Vasiljev, Alex. *Success with Orchids Indoors*. Fine Gardening. 2020. [www.finegardening.com/article/success-with-orchids-indoors](http://www.finegardening.com/article/success-with-orchids-indoors)



# Hotline FAQs

Have gardening questions?  
Contact a Master Gardener!

Placer Co. 530-889-7388

Nevada Co. 530-273-0919

Nevada County office closed due to COVID-19 testing site. Contact us through our [website](#) or [Facebook](#).

## Do you have suggestions for spring flowering bulbs that do well in our area?

by Pauline Kuklis, UC Master Gardener of Placer County

Spring flowering bulbs are a wonderful way to add a splash of early color to your yard. Plant a variety of bulbs in mulched areas or under trees for a showy spring display. Most bulbs require little water and are nearly maintenance free.

Select plump, healthy bulbs or corms and plant them in the fall (late September to December). They will do best in full sun or partial shade where the soil drains well. Most bulbs should be planted about twice as deep as they are tall. Ideally, you should deadhead the flowers as they die back, and allow the leaves to turn brown and dry before removing the debris. Bulbs and corms will divide and become overcrowded, so they will need to be dug up and divided every few years. Replant what you can and donate any extras to your friends!

Below is a short list of bulbs that do very well in our area:

1. **Peruvian Scilla** (pictured below) This purple beauty is one of the earliest flowering bulbs and makes a fantastic border around the edge of a berm or beneath a tree.
2. **Daffodils and Narcissus** Plant in clusters for maximum effect. You have many types to choose from, and their blooming time can vary. You can extend the blooming period and add interest by planting several different varieties.
3. **Grape Hyacinth** This tiny bulb can provide a sea of deep blue and look fantastic when surrounding clusters of daffodils or narcissus.
4. **Gladious** These beauties come in a huge variety of stunning colors. Cut and arrange the flowers in a large vase to add instant drama to your home. They are also a favorite of hummingbirds.
5. **Allium** The large purple globes are a delight to the eye. As an added benefit, these bulbs (which are in the onion family) are deer resistant.

For additional information about selecting and planting bulbs in our area, check out the following online resources:

[http://sacmg.ucanr.edu/Sacramento\\_Bulb\\_Planting\\_Schedule/](http://sacmg.ucanr.edu/Sacramento_Bulb_Planting_Schedule/)

<http://www.ucanr.org/blogs/blogcore/postdetail.cfm?postnum=22522>

