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Growing Orchids in Havasu

If you love to look at flowers but it is just too hot to be outside, you may consider an orchid plant indoors. Orchids are now ranked one of the top selling house plants. They are readily available at reasonable prices. Their flowers can be long lasting.

The orchid family of plants is the largest family in the plant kingdom. Orchids are distributed throughout the world. Therefore there are many types of orchids which reside in many extremely different growing conditions. One of the most frequently seen orchids is called Phalaenopsis or the shorter version Phal. These are the orchids most often seen in stores and pictured in home interiors. They can stay in bloom for months at a time and are easily grown if a few guidelines are followed.

Phalaenopsis in nature grow clinging to tree branches. Their fleshy roots attach the plant firmly to the bark of a tree. In nature they grow upside down when compared with how they grow in a pot. In cultivation Phal's enjoy the same temperatures that we do. They like filtered light, air movement, humidity around 60% - the difficult one here in Havasu, being moist, not wet and being repotted about every two years.

Here are some guidelines to follow when growing Phalaenopsis in the desert.

Plant Placement

Do not place under a heating/cooling vent. The forced air with heat or air conditioning will be too drying. Light should be morning light filtered with a sheer curtain. Afternoon sun will burn the plants leaves. A simple test is to move a hand over the leaves, no shadow should be seen and the leaves should feel cool to touch.

Water

In hot dry weather water every other day, in cool weather and/or when the humidity is high (not often here) water every third day or twice per week. When watering, water until run off water is seen coming out the drainage holes at the bottom of the pot. Water should not be softened as softened water usually contains salt (sodium). Bottled water is good. Do not keep the plant constantly wet as the roots will rot. When watering your plant do not water in the center (crown) of the plant where the leaves meet. If water stands in the crown of the plant over night it will cause crown rot and the plant will die.

Fertilizer

Use a balanced fertilizer of 20-20-20 alternated with a 30-10-10. To encourage blooms (usually in the fall) a high-phosphate fertilizer as 10-50-10 may be add to the routine. Use fertilizers at a very dilute rate, usually ¼ of what the container recommends.

Fertilize about every 2 weeks after regular watering. A periodic feeding with a dilute fish emulsion is also beneficial.

Humidity

Ideal is 60-70%. I can manage 45% by misting with a spray bottle in the morning and setting the plant on a humidity tray. This is a shallow bowl, tray or old baking pan which is larger than the pot the plant is in. In the container add some pebbles or a large plastic lid (top up) place the plant on the pebbles/lid to hold the pot above the water which you will add to the container to provide humidity. The container will also catch the water running through the pot when watering. Do not allow the pot to sit in water.

Flowers

Assuming the plant is purchased in bloom it may stay in bloom for several months. When all the flowers fall off the spike, leave the spike in place as long as it remains green. Old spikes will often re-bloom and occasionally they produce a baby plantlet called a keiki.

Potting

If the plant has roots going up over the pot and the leaves are extending well over the pot or if the potting material looks rotted and is staying wet for days at a time, it is time to provide your plant a new home. When the plant goes out of bloom obtain a somewhat larger pot which is clean and has multiple drain holes. Do not use dirt. Repot your plant using a bark mixture or sphagnum moss. These are available at a nursery and on the web under orchid supplies.

Carefully remove the plant from its old pot. The roots are thick and brittle. They break easily. Trim off any dead roots which are soft and brown. Lift the plant into the center of the new pot and carefully add the bark or moss packing it lightly around the roots. Water the plant well to wet the new potting material.

If you love to grow flowers please try growing a Phalaenopsis. Once one blooms for you, you may be hooked for life. I sure was. Happy growing!

Kaye Gregory is a Lake Havasu City Master Gardener. For more information, contact the Lake Havasu City Master Gardeners by calling their Hot Line at 505-4105 or visit us at Home Garden Day from 11 am to 1 pm the first Tuesday of every month at the Library.

Illustration taken from “Orchids for everyone” Consultant: Jack Kramer.

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