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Selecting an Orchid for Your Home

People the world over have been attracted, captivated and enchanted by orchids. They come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes and colours. A little general knowledge will assist you in selecting the genus, or type of orchid, best suited for a favored place in your home. The cultivation of orchids is a traditional hobby in many cultures: Chinese, British, and Japanese, to name but a few. Confucius believed that the sweet fragrance of the *Cymbidium* was like the essence of fine friendship.

Most orchids commercially grown in Canada are four to five years old when purchased by the consumer. With simple regular care, they can grow into beautiful specimen plants in a few years, giving the owner fabulous shows of colour and blooms for years. Most genera can be divided when mature to be traded and shared with friends.

When selecting an orchid there are 2 key considerations:

1. The light levels of the window or room.
2. The typical temperature range of the room where it will be placed (note seasonal changes).

Remember that the quantity of light in the home is affected by such things as the presence of outdoor trees, adjacent buildings, overhangs, blinds and sheers. Try to keep your orchids away from warm air vents. Those locations are particularly dry. If your home is dry you can place your potted orchid on a "humidity tray". This is usually a plastic tray containing 1 to 2 inches of pebbles. Put 1/2 inch to 1 inch of water in the bottom of the tray and place your plant on it. Maintain a fairly constant water level. The evaporation of the water from the tray creates a micro climate of higher humidity around your orchid. This is a simple and highly effective tool.

Most orchids will tell you if they are getting enough light by their leaf colour. The definition of healthy leaf colour varies between orchid genera. In general, most have a medium green tone. *Miltoniopsis* tend to have paler leaves while *Phalaenopsis* and equitant *Oncidium*s have darker leaves. Note the colour of the leaves when purchasing a healthy plant. Try to maintain this colour.

Orchids which receive too little light tend to become very dark green while those receiving too much light tend to look pale green or even yellowish. Many orchids let you know they are receiving optimal light by developing red leaf edges, entirely red foliage is a sign of excessive light and can lead to "sunburn". Sunburn can occur relatively quickly, within a few hours, and can appear as white spots or even black dry spots on the leaves. At optimal light levels, *Phalaenopsis*, *Odontoglossum* and *Tolumnia* (formerly called "equitant *Oncidium*") all exhibit this characteristic reddening of their leaves or bulbs. Watch changes in light levels particularly in south and west windows in the months of June and July. You may have to move plants away



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from such locations during these months. Severe sunburn can quickly kill a plant either directly or through secondary infection.

Categories of Orchids

For the purpose of selection, orchids can be grouped into four **<you say 4 here but only 3 listed below>** broad categories based on preferred growing temperatures and light levels. There will be exceptions, and some genera and varieties have broader habitat ranges and can tolerate conditions in more than one category.

Low to Moderate Light, Cool Growing Orchids

These orchids like bright north, east or protected west windows with temperatures between 15-21°C (60 – 70 °F) during the day and 12-18°C (55 - 65°F) nighttime temperatures. Included in this group are the *Masdevallia*, *Miltoniopsis* (pansy orchid), *Zygopetalum* and *Odontoglossum* (odont). All like to be kept evenly moist but not wet.

The large happy face of *Miltoniopsis* brings immediate association with the traditional pansy. Available in soft yellows, whites, velvety burgundies, pink and every combination thereof, they bloom on mature new growth. Many varieties are delicately fragrant. Blooms may last 4-6 weeks. Peak blooming season is spring to early summer. "Milts" prefer cool to average household temperatures and an east window, some very bright north windows may also be suitable. Night temperatures need to be 5°C (8°F) lower than day temperatures for these plants to bloom on mature new growths.

Odontoglossum, which is just now gaining familiarity in the west, can only be described as elegant and decadent. Available in every colour combination imaginable, long vertical stems exhibit between 5 to 20 flowers lasting 6 to 8 weeks on a mature plant. Flower stems are produced on mature new growth, generally in the late fall to spring. *Odontoglossum* love to go outside from early summer to early fall with a north or east exposure, while temperatures are still within the appropriate range. In the home, a bright east window is best.

Zygopetalum is also included in this category. The "Ladybird Orchid" is characterized by a luscious display of 3 to 8 flowers on a stem. The fragrance is reminiscent of hyacinth or narcissus. Available in rich shades of greens, purples, raspberry and burgundy. Generally blooms in late fall to spring on immature new growths, before the pseudobulb forms. Mature specimens can bloom twice a year. These plants have deciduous leaves. *Zygopetalum* love to go outside from early summer to early-fall with a north or east exposure, while temperatures are still within the appropriate range.

Masdevallia are continuous bloomers and will do best under low light conditions. Many are surprised to find that these small compact plants are actually orchids. Blooming on new growth or leaf, *Masdevallia* may bloom continuously for months at a time, with flushes in fall and/or



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spring. Available in white, electric orange, yellow, purple and pink, this little orchid is a wonderful addition to a bright north or east windowsill. They will not tolerate hot spells.

Low Light, Warm Growing Orchids

These orchids enjoy a north or an east, protected west or shaded south windows of the home. Standard household temperatures are adequate.

Paphiopedilum, or lady slipper orchid, blooms on mature new growth usually in the spring. The richly mottled foliage of some varieties is very attractive. They like to be evenly moist. Available in green, white, deep burgundy and combinations of the three, they are unique and mysterious. North or east windows are optimal.

Phalaenopsis, the moth orchid, is considered to be one of the easiest orchids to grow. A mature plant typically sold in a 5 or 6 inch pot may bloom for 3 to 5 months with simple care. A 5 to 6 week cool treatment of temperatures between 16-20°C (62 - 68°F) will initiate blooming. Available in whites, pink, rich purples, yellows with solid, striped, and freckled patterns, *Phalaenopsis* adds elegance to any home. They like drying slightly between watering. North or east windows are optimal.

Oncidium, dancing lady, are very versatile orchids. Blooming on mature new growth, clouds of dancing delicate flowers in white, yellow and burgundy appear on long arching branched stems. *Oncidium* Sharry Baby is a deep burgundy and smells like chocolate or vanilla. A very versatile orchid that can do well in an east, west or shaded south window.

Moderate to High Light, Warm Growing Orchids

These orchids like a lot of light and warm household temperatures. They thrive in a west or south window. From early May to late September, you should watch light levels in south windows to avoid burning; you may have to move your orchid away from the window or place them behind a sheer curtain to decrease light intensity. These orchids like to dry between watering.

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Cattleya are available in mini and standard sizes. Minis, when mature, can bloom 1 to 3 times a year on mature new growths. Compact and attractive, they make a wonderful windowsill or table-top flower display and are often wonderfully fragrant. Dozens of varieties are available and make these little fellows wonderful to collect. Standard and mini are available in every colour of the rainbow.



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Dendrobium is one of the largest orchid genus. They too tolerate higher levels of sunlight making them very versatile. *Dendrobium* come in mini, compact or semi-mini and standard sizes. The minis are elegant on a table while the standards more appropriate in pots on the floor because of their height. *Dendrobium* bloom on mature new growth with flowers on the plant lasting 6 to 14 weeks.

Other Things to Consider

Humidity

Try to keep your orchids away from warm air vents. Those locations are particularly dry. If your home is dry you can place your potted orchid on a "humidity tray". This is usually a plastic tray containing 1 to 2 inches of pebbles. Put 1/2 inch to 1 inch of water in the bottom of the tray and place your plant on it. Maintain a fairly constant water level. The evaporation of the water from the tray creates a micro climate of higher humidity around your orchid. This is a simple and highly effective tool.

Potting media

This is a topic unto itself. Each orchid genus has different media requirements. It is very important to have the correct media for the type of orchid depending on whether they are terrestrial or epiphytic - tree dwellers. Growing media most commonly include fir bark, coarse peat, sphagnum moss, tree fern fibers and perlite; most often a mixture of two or three of these materials. Epiphytes such as *Phalaenopsis* will tend to require a coarser media to allow more air around the roots. **All orchids potted in a typical bark media need to be repotted every 18 to 24 months depending on the specific needs of the individual plant. The bark eventually begins to decompose and this process chokes the orchid's roots.**

Others, such as the *Oncidium* and *Dendrobium*, bloom on mature new growth, and only require a change in fertilizer to a phosphorus rich, blossom booster formula such as 10-30-20. Knowledge of watering, temperature and fertilizer requirements for each genus is necessary for successful reblooming, year after year.

Reblooming

Each genus of orchids has different requirements to rebloom. Most commercial varieties are very simple to rebloom. *Phalaenopsis*, *Zygopetalum*, and *Odontoglossum* require slight changes in temperature to initiate blooming.



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Finding Futher Information

Most major cities across Canada have orchid societies where orchid enthusiasts, whether experts or beginners, come together to learn, trade, collect and enjoy orchids. The American Orchid Society has an excellent magazine and carries periodicals and books for beginners to experts alike. Their web site address is www.aos.org and is linked to others. By linking to other sites, you can quickly find cultural, breeding and historical information on several genera.

The web has a wealth of readily available information.