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Oncidium



Temperature: Average household temperatures of 19 to 27°C (66 to 80°F) during the day and night temperatures of 13 to 21°C (55 to 70°F) are adequate. Keep out of draft.

Light: *Oncidium* require medium to high light of an east or west window or diffused light of a south window. Leaves are normally a bright green, but will bleach if plant gets too much light.

Watering: Water generously, let dry between watering. Do not let stand in water. Water once a week during the winter and every 3 to 5 days during the summer. Use a humidity tray to increase local humidity.

Fertilizing: Fertilize at ¼ to ½ strength with 28-14-14 at every watering to promote new growth. When new growth matures, start fertilizing with 10-30-20 at half strength to promote flowering.

Re-blooming: *Oncidium*s will bloom on mature new growths, usually in fall and winter, given adequate light, water and fertilizers.

Repotting and potting medium type: A coarse free-draining medium that rapidly dries is recommended. Repot every 12 to 24 months, as required.

Oncidium are often called “Dancing Ladies” because they reward their growers with a cloud of flowers whose shape is reminiscent of the flowing ball gowns of the 19th century.

The first *Oncidium* hybrid was made in 1909 by Charlesworth & Co. Ltd., in England and appropriately named Hybridum (*Onc. lamelligerum* x *Onc. tigrinum*). Since then, some 2000 *Oncidium* hybrids have been registered. The sweetly fragrant species *Oncidium ornithorynchum* has been used in over 50 hybrids in an attempt to produce more fragrant hybrids. One of its most famous “grandchildren” is *Onc. Sharry Baby*. Sharry Baby has larger blooms than *ornithorynchum* and stronger stems but has inherited a sweet vanilla or chocolate fragrance from this species. The American Orchid Society



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has awarded 6 cultivars of *Onc.* Sharry Baby, attesting to the quality of these plants. Another important *Oncidium* hybrid is Goldiana, a cross between *Oncidium flexosum* and *Onc. sphacelatum*. This hybrid appears as a parent or grandparent of many commercially available yellow *Oncidiums* such as Gower Ramsey, Taka and Sweet Sugar.

Oncidium is a diverse group of orchids with a contentious taxonomic history. Carolus Linnaeus first described these plants as part of the genus *Epidendrum*, which is related to *Cattleya*. Olof Swartz established the genus *Oncidium* late last century, separating the 2 genera. The genus *Oncidium* has undergone several very recent revisions by taxonomists, maybe the next millennium will see the beginning of a consensus on this subject. For the present, orchid enthusiasts will have to be satisfied with numbers of species within *Oncidium* varying between 300 and 700, depending on the classification used. This taxonomic uncertainty is largely explained by the diverse growth habits, plant and flower forms found in this genus. This diversity is reflected in common names such as “Dancing Ladies” and “Mule Ears”.

The *Oncidium* discussed in the first paragraph are called thin-leaved oncidiums. They like warm house temperatures (20 to 26°C / 68 to 78°F) but will not suffer from cooler nights (as low as 15°C / 59°F). The moderate light of a bright west window or protected south window would be most suitable. These *Oncidium* do not like to be constantly wet, so the potting media should have good drainage without being too coarse, as these *Oncidium* roots are rather thin. These are the easiest *Oncidium* to grow.

The “Mule Ear” *Oncidium* are more challenging to grow in a home. They require brighter light such as that of a south window and warmer day and night temperatures. They require less water than other *Oncidium* and will benefit from a high humidity atmosphere as for the equitants. “Mule Ear” *Oncidium* are easily recognized by their stiff leathery leaves resembling the ear of a mule or donkey. The upright stem bears large blooms in unusual color combination and pattern, such as chartreuse blooms heavily blotched with burnt orange with a pink lip.

Former Oncidiums

Long classified in the genus *Oncidium*, the Butterfly Orchid has recently been given its own genus, *Psychopsis*. They have leathery mottled leaves and the flower stem carries one very large butterfly-shaped yellow bloom with brown barring. Although flower stems only bear one bloom at a time, stems will keep on flowering sequentially for several months. They require full sunlight and summer temperatures as high as 30 to 40°C (86 to 104°F), never lower than 18°C (65°F) even in winter. In order to bloom, this plant



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requires a dryer period once the new growth is mature. Due to this necessary but stressful treatment, the plant often looks sickly by the time the flower stem appears. This is the most challenging *Oncidium* to grow and bloom.

Oncidium formerly included the Equitant *Oncidium*, which are now classified in the genus *Tolumnia*. Please refer to the care sheet for *Tolumnia* for more information.