

fresh focus

By Bill McKinley AIFD and Bruce Wright

Potted orchids have become commonplace, yet they remain the epitome of chic.



Today's commercially available orchid plants exhibit endless variety. Photo courtesy of the Association of Dutch Orchid Producers at www.orchids-info.com.

Common Name	Botanical Name	Flowers per Spike (Average)	Individual Flower Size	Fragrance	Bloom Longevity
Moth orchid	<i>Phalaenopsis</i> spp.	4 to 8	Mini: 2 inches Standard: 3 to 5 inches	None	3 to 4 months
Dendrobium	<i>Dendrobium</i> spp.	10 to 15	1 to 2 inches	None	2 to 3 months
Lady slipper	<i>Paphiopedilum</i> spp.	1 to 2	2 to 5 inches	None	6 to 8 weeks
Cymbidium	<i>Cymbidium</i> spp.	8 to 16	Mini: 1 to 2 inches Standard: 3 to 4 inches	Mild	4 to 6 weeks
Cattleya	<i>Cattleya</i> spp.	1 to 4	2 to 8 inches	Mild	2 to 4 weeks
Oncidium	<i>Oncidium</i> spp.	10 to 30	1/2 to 1 inch	None	2 to 4 weeks

Orchid plants are so ubiquitous today, it's hard to remember they were once widely assumed to be expensive and difficult to grow—a hobby for well-heeled enthusiasts. Over the past 15 years or more, potted orchids have become widely available in a competitive, high-volume market. Rivaling poinsettias for the number-one position among top-selling potted plants, orchids accounted for nearly \$126 million in sales in 2007, according to the USDA.

It's all the more remarkable that potted orchids have lost none of their native elegance. They remain a staple for professional florists, who may not be able to compete with big-box stores on price, but who do quite well with orchid plants when they emphasize variety, quality, and presentation. Indeed, no florist catering to the high end of the market can afford to be without a selection of orchid plants.

When it comes to variety, the world of orchids has plenty to offer. The family Orchidaceae is thought by some to have as many as 30,000 species—a rich genetic pool for hybridizers in all the various popular genera, which include, but are not limited to, those on the chart above.

Phalaenopsis, for example, remains the most popular of the commercial potted orchids, but commonly available phalaenopsis varieties are no longer restricted to the standard white or purple blooms; hybrids now come in a wide range of colors and pot sizes, from display-sized ten-inch pots to two-inch minis.

The full range of potted orchids includes such striking curiosities as miniature cattleyas, "also called windowsill plants, because they're that easy to take care of," says Lynn Muramoto of **Family Flower Farms** in Kapa'a, Hawai'i. She points out that many of the orchid plants sold today—which may look

more or less like a cattleya, phalaenopsis, or other popular genus—are actually intergeneric hybrids (obtained by crossing one genus with another): a *Brassolaeliocattleya*, for example, or a *Doritaenopsis*.

"People love variety," Lynn observes. The challenge of creating new varieties is greater with orchids because they are notoriously difficult to grow from seed. The seeds are microscopic in size, and as with other breeding operations, it may take tens of thousands of seedlings to derive 10 or 20 market-worthy hybrids. Once these new varieties are developed, however, modern techniques of propagation via tissue culture make for a shorter path from innovative hybridizing to commercial availability.

In all their diversity, the orchids commonly available as potted plants do have some things in common. They are available year-round. In their natural habitat, most are

epiphytes, growing on the bark of trees rather than in soil on the ground. Epiphytes are not parasites to their host tree; rather, they obtain their water and nutrients through a spongy covering of their thick roots that accumulates on the tree bark. All this explains why most orchids prefer a well-draining, soilless medium—often composed of bark.

Quality control

Novelty in color or form is evident to the naked eye; all too often, the attributes of quality are not. Indeed, as with cut flowers, the lasting quality of potted orchids may not become apparent until it's too late—after they're in the customer's home, with buds dropping or flowers withering before their time.

Quality depends on the stock that is used and on how the grower treats the plants. Cymbidium orchids offer a good example. They're larger and more showy than many other orchid plants—which means they take longer to reach maturity. It can take as long as three to five years to grow a standard cymbidium plant, versus a year and a half for phalaenopsis, perhaps only a year for a smaller orchid like miltonia.

Growers may be tempted to hasten that process by raising the temperature in the greenhouse. "But when you do that, you get a softer, weaker plant," says John Ernest, laboratory manager for **Gallup & Stribling**, a breeder and grower that has been specializing in cymbidiums for more than 50 years. "Cool temps produce a hardier plant." (In their native habitats, cymbidiums typically grow at higher elevations.) Plants grown in cooler greenhouses may be a little more expensive—or not. However, it's worth asking whether those you purchase were "naturally cold grown" or sped up with heat.

Here are other grower techniques to ask about when you buy cymbidiums: some growers water the plants with drip irrigation, which means they receive water as many as eight or ten times a day. "The problem is, the plant becomes like a little heroin addict," says John. "Unless it keeps on getting watered that often in the store and in the home, it's going to suffer, maybe drop some of the buds."

"We water once a week and then make sure the plants are watered right before they leave our facilities. Also, we grow in a bark mixture, which retains moisture well. It's common for other growers to use coconut husk, which is cheaper, but it dries out faster and it's difficult to re-wet."

Finally, Gallup & Stribling orchid plants are shipped standing up, which can be more expensive, but which protects the plant, versus shipping with the plant on its side.

"In the mass-market channels, there's a lot of turnover among the buyers," John laments. "In some cases these people are incentivized to buy on price alone. The worst part of that is when their customers have a bad experience with low-quality orchids and overgeneralize from that, so they come to believe potted orchids are not a good value. We really believe it's in our long-term best interest to make people happy with a plant that lasts a long time."

Ancient history

Recent studies suggest that orchids have been around longer than was previously thought, taking their origins in the time of the dinosaurs. "They're the most highly evolved plants on earth," boasts Family Flower Farms' Lynn Muramoto. "That explains the innate attraction. Just one orchid will change the energy in a room."

"Plus, with proper care, the same orchid plant will keep blooming and reblooming," Lynn adds. "You could even say they are immortal."

Long live orchids! 🌸



care tips for potted orchids

(Always check the individual care tag on a plant for information specific to the genus or intergeneric hybrid.)

Light Most potted orchids prefer indirect, low or medium light (no direct sunlight).

Water Extra care should be taken not to overwater orchids. A well-drained, soilless orchid mix or orchid bark potting medium is preferred.

Temperature Orchids prefer temperatures above 55 degrees F and are most comfortable between 70 and 80 degrees F. Some species need a cool cycle to initiate flower spikes; refer to specific care instructions.

Fertilizer Orchids are not heavy fertilizer users and will only occasionally need a dilute liquid fertilizer application.

Cymbidiums, among the showiest of potted orchids, come in a rainbow of colors. Photo courtesy of Gallup & Stribling, www.gallup-stribling.com.