

Orchid pests and diseases - An ounce of prevention.

When it comes to orchids there is no substitute for good clean living. In their natural habitat on rocks or trees, epiphytic orchids have evolved and adapted to be little troubled by disease. The closer we come to duplicating this preferred habitat the fewer problems we encounter. They need:

1. A potting mix allowing free drainage of the roots. This discourages rots and fungi.
2. A location offering enough warmth, sunlight, humidity and free air movement without overcrowding.
3. Reduced watering and feeding during any natural rest periods.

Each orchid species seems to have its own particular susceptibility or resistance to various infestations, again related to the preferred habitat.

Plants which are poorly situated will often have multiple problems. Any infestation should beg the question: "Is the plant happy there?". This is a demand to consider relocation and environment. Getting the temperature, sunlight, ventilation, feeding, watering and humidity right prevents many problems.

Prime orchid real estate is scarce and there is always a temptation to crowd in too many plants. This encourages spread of disease, reduces free air movement and access for inspection. The worst infestations are often on the side of the plant hidden away from light. Damaged and deformed plants are also prime targets. Disease rapidly spreads from neglected plants.

Monitor your plants regularly, particularly the crevices and underside of leaves. A visit at night by torchlight also gives a new perspective on pests, especially slugs, snails and cockroaches.

If a plant is not thriving, inspect it carefully for evidence of disease. This should include knocking it out of the pot to inspect the roots and the mix. A pot-bound plant is difficult to inspect and is susceptible to disease, so repot in good time.

Eliminate reservoirs of diseases. Adjacent garden plants can act as a serious reservoir for infestations and should not be left untreated. This can be very difficult with large rambling plants.

Sterilize cutting tools before use.

Check all new purchases carefully (hopefully before you buy) to avoid introducing new pests. Buy from reputable sources and if uncertain, isolate the plant for a period and monitor. Learn to recognise a good vigorous healthy plant and do not accept anything less. Routinely repot and treat all new purchases with eco-oil or a similar prophylactic.

Isolate sick plants. Destroy any showing evidence of virus.

Always practice good plant hygiene. Remove any dead material regularly, particularly old flower spikes and husks where scale and other pests hide. Covering rhizomes and stems with potting mix also creates hiding places. Only roots should be covered. Dispose of infected material promptly well away from the main collection. Keep the floor clean. If your orchids are popular with ants, expect aphids, thrip and scale. Aphids of course help spread disease.

Glass houses. Putting orchids into a glasshouse is analogous to putting a patient into intensive care; you become responsible for doing everything for them in a foreign and highly artificial environment. Temperature, humidity, air movement and sunlight can be very difficult to get right even for a single species let alone a mixed collection. Simple problems rapidly multiply and become complex.

Don't put cool growing orchids into a hot house in the hope of pushing them along. Cool growing orchids will be happier in a shade-house. In fact I see less infestation among plants exposed to the elements than among those I shelter under the pergola. I therefore limit the time plants spend under shelter (usually in winter and when flowering only).