

Buying an Orchid

By Dr Fred

I remember making a lot of early mistakes as a budding orchid fancier. It all seemed to be very mysterious and my cultivation attempts were often the kiss of death for these purchases. Here are some thoughts to help you avoid common pitfalls.

Start with the common “cheap and cheerful” orchids. There are many lessons to be learned from these before you are a proficient grower and you will be more likely to experiment with these than with an expensive orchid. If you want advice and some assurance on quality at a very reasonable price, the sales table at our monthly meetings is the ideal starting point. Most orchids are bought on impulse and at a premium because they are in full bloom. While I try to resist impulse buying, an early strategy I found helpful was to purchase one or two flowering plants each month at the monthly meeting. I now have something in flower most of the year round and experience with a wide range of different orchids.

Friends who grow orchids well can be a great help with local knowledge and spare plants. Try and be around to help when they are dividing them. Having a “potting up party” can be a fun way to tackle this chore and swap some orchids.

Buy locally. The orchid which looks so good on your Queensland holiday may get a rude shock when it arrives in Sydney. Local markets are worth considering but inspect carefully.

Unknown deceased estates and garage sales are potentially dangerous as the orchids have usually been neglected for some time.

What orchid to start with? There are some reliable “old favourites” which are cool growing and do well in Sydney. They include cymbidiums, dendrobiums, cattleyas, stanhopeas, miltonias and coelogynes for outdoors and phalaenopsis for indoors. The first question is do you have somewhere suitable to put it? Does it thrive indoors, under the pergola, in a shade house or in the garden? Always get as much information at the point of sale as possible. How big does it grow? How much sun does it need? Does it need shelter in winter? Is it prone to any particular problems? Most reputable vendors will be happy to encourage beginners, but beware if you are fobbed off with “it’s an easy one to grow”. Growing can be easy but the end game is flowering which only occurs under the right conditions.

Inspect the plant carefully. Is the orchid healthy or neglected? Learn to recognize a healthy and vigorous plant. Visible healthy roots have active green tips. Is the plant established or was it potted yesterday with a less certain future? If doubts remain I will often try to knock it out of its pot (with owner’s permission of course) for a more complete root inspection. Check under the leaves and at their base for scale and other pests. Virus may show as linear yellow colour breaks. Don’t risk introducing a diseased orchid into your budding collection in the hope you may be able to nurse it back to health. Beware of old commercial cymbidiums in full bloom but forced along and badly in need of repotting.

When you arrive home with your purchase, consider repotting it in your own mix for uniformity. Read about your new purchases. This is made easy by the internet and orchid society websites. The American Orchid Society site is particularly good. What type of conditions does it prefer? Pencil in some cultivation notes on the back of the label for future reference. Also a good basic book written for Australian conditions is “Botanica’s Pocket Orchids” which is cheap and widely available. Take it with you on shopping expeditions.

Be prepared to lose a few orchids to gain knowledge and experience. Once you find the right plant for the right location and persuade it to flower, you are ready to move on. After trying a number of species, you may even decide to specialise. Above all don't be discouraged by setbacks. Persevere! But beware; orchids are addictive.