

# Pests and Diseases

By Dr Fred

## 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, orchids have evolved and adapted to be little troubled by disease. The closer we come to duplicating this preferred habitat the fewer problems we have. They need:

1. A potting mix allowing free drainage of the roots which 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 the 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 temperatures, sunlight, ventilation, feeding, watering and humidity right is a great prophylactic.

Prime orchid real estate is scarce and there is always the 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 undersides of leaves. A visit at night by torchlight also gives a new perspective on pests, especially regarding 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 susceptible to disease, so repot in good time. Isolate sick plants and destroy any showing evidence of virus.

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.

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. Treat all new purchases routinely with eco-oil or a similar prophylactic.

Always practice good plant hygiene. Sterilize cutting tools before use. Remove any dead material regularly, particularly old flower spikes and husks where scale and other pests hide. Avoid creating hiding places by covering rhizomes and stems with potting mix. Only the 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 and scale. Aphids of course help spread disease.

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 growers 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 that plants spend under shelter (usually in winter and when flowering only).