

Why won't my orchid flower?

Flowering is the lure and the challenge which makes orchid cultivation so fascinating. To flower, an orchid must complete a cycle of growth, flowering and possibly dormancy. For many tropical orchids, our growing season is too short (insufficient hours of sunshine and warmth) to complete this cycle. Unless you have a greenhouse you should stick with cool and intermediate growing species.

Root damage and infestations, particularly virus, scale and spider mites can also sap enough energy to inhibit flowering.

To obtain enough sunlight and warmth to complete the cycle may require moving the plant about with the seasons. Move the orchid about until you find its niche. Sometimes the distance involved is quite small and may be slightly vertical or to one side. Flowering is a very energy intensive strategy for orchids. If you move a plant into a better position, try to maintain the same orientation to the sun so that it does not lose time and energy in re-orienting the leaves and flowers.

You can read about each orchid's natural habitat and try to duplicate it, but within any genus growing requirements can vary widely and it is difficult to generalise. It is better to learn the tricks from other successful growers in your area.

Most Cymbidiums need a reasonable amount of sunlight all year round for flowering, and even full sun in winter. A common problem is the orchid banished to the bottom of the garden in a shady nook where flowering would be a true act of desperation. A similar common trap is to bring home the new orchid in full bloom and then keep it indoors until the flowers finish. The month or two of missed sunlight will compromise next year's flowering.

During periods of active growth, warmth and regular feeding with a dilute high nitrogen fertilizer helps speed the cycle, but healthy growth does not always translate to flowers. Continuing such feeding when the orchid would normally be setting buds encourages growth but inhibits flowering, so most growers change to a "bloom booster" preparation high in potassium and phosphate at this critical time.

There is a school of thought which says that orchids flower when stressed. Reduced watering and feeding, increased light, and crowding all act as stressors. It is true that some orchids seem to flower only as a last resort when times are tough and prefer to proliferate under more ideal conditions. So avoid too much TLC in the weeks leading up to spike formation!

Some orchids flower best when crowded in the pot as specimen plants, and premature repotting or over-potting can inhibit flowering for some time. If necessary, repotting after flowering is a good rule.

A variable dormant phase (usually in winter) is common to many cool growing orchids especially those with large pseudo-bulbs. If watering and feeding is not greatly reduced during the

dormant period, flowering will suffer. Maintain fairly bright light and dry roots until new shoots or buds appear.

Some Dendrobiums flower only on last year's canes after the leaves have dropped, so don't be hasty in cutting them off until they're brown and dead.

Many Cymbidiums need a drop in evening temperature during February to trigger flowering and in Sydney this may need assistance with evening watering at this time.

In some species flowering is triggered by changes in the number of hours of daylight. For others the trigger is complex.

There is no single panacea for orchids which won't flower although in refractory cases I have had some success walking past the plant with an axe!

If you can't find a suitable niche after a reasonable period of time, pass it on to another fancier who may have better luck and enjoy the challenge.

Many of the new hybrids have much better flowering potential than the older species so rather than persist with hand-me-downs consider investing in new plants with a better track record.

Once you flower a particular type of orchid, exploit your success by diversifying into related species.