

Cymbidiums

By Dr Fred

Your first orchid was probably a Cymbidium which arrived as a gift, with spikes of large colorful flowers which then languished until thrown away. This is a pity, because these are some of the easiest, most available and rewarding orchids for beginners. Unfortunately some are quite large and if space is a problem, consider the miniatures. The most popular Cymbidiums are hybrids which can be quite spectacular, but species are available.

Location is the key. An easterly aspect is ideal to get morning sun and afternoon shade in summer. In winter they will tolerate full sun all day long. A shade house with about 30% shade is ideal but alternatively they can be scattered through the garden. Light shade under a (preferably deciduous) tree will suffice. In both situations they seem to enjoy the natural cycle of rain and dry. A reasonable amount of sunlight (short of scorching) is required year-round to promote flowering. Too many Cymbidiums languish under dense shade at the bottom of the garden, neglected and unloved. This must be the commonest cause of failure to flower. A little extra protection from frosts in winter is appreciated. A front porch or the eaves of the house provide sufficient shelter if you don't have a shade house.

If you have multiple plants avoid crowding as it reduces sunlight and free air movement, leading to infestations and rot. Pots should be raised off the ground, ideally at about knee height to promote free drainage and sun exposure. This also discourages snails.

Water Cymbidiums as they dry out. In summer watering is often necessary daily and should include the foliage. In winter, a morning watering once every week is enough. Remove that saucer under the pot in winter as retained water will lead to root rot.

A regular feeding program pays dividends and this should include occasional trace elements (eg seaweed solutions) and calcium (eg Magamp) to promote strong flower spikes. While in active growth feed at least weekly with a soluble fertilizer at half strength. This should be done after watering.

In March/April the plant needs signals to tell it to change from growth to flowering mode. For the bigger Cymbidiums flowering is triggered naturally by a drop in evening temperatures. In Sydney you may need to help this along by evening spraying, misting or watering in February and March. Miniature Cymbidiums do not seem to share this trigger for flowering. They are better adapted and will flower well despite our warmer climate. Both types appreciate feeding with one of the commercial bloom boosters from February as the spikes form. These are high in phosphorus and potassium.

You can then join in the excitement of hunting for early flower spikes in mid-year and prepare to stake them. If you plan to bring the spikes into the house, cut them off just before the last flower opens and they will be quite long-lived in water. After flowering, remove the old spikes and consider repotting if the plant is becoming pot-bound. For smaller plants, pot on into a new,

slightly larger pot and top up with fresh Cymbidium mix. Take the opportunity to remove any dead husks from around the back bulbs as these harbor pests such as scale.

For larger plants requiring division simply divide in two with a sharp sterilized instrument. Don't bother to tease out the roots although any obviously dead roots can be removed. A little root damage is expected, but hopefully this will be confined to the older roots. After division there may be a delay before flowering resumes but often plants which have been pot-bound will make up for lost time and flower next season.

Use only orchid potting mix and do not reuse old potting mix. These encourage disease.