

Orchids in the Garden

Doctor Fred

Most frost-free gardens contain many small microclimates favourable to orchid culture. To identify prime orchid real estate, look for natural suntraps and sheltered spots which are warm and bright in winter. Shade in summer is also desirable and to get the best of both worlds you may need to move your orchids about with the seasons. Siting them under deciduous trees can be a good compromise. You can check the preferred aspect of the different types of orchid on the internet.

Many common orchids which make good garden specimens such as Cymbidiums and Cattleyas, will tolerate full sun in winter and can become infested with scale if they do not get enough sun.

Most outdoor orchids do better under the shelter of the house eaves where the temperature range is more favourable. A brick wall will help by radiating absorbed heat at night.

Orchids in the garden should never be in contact with the ground but should be raised on bricks or higher to avoid fungal infection and to make them less accessible to other pests.

Space is usually at a premium in small gardens and the best spots may already be occupied, but orchids can adapt to situations unsuitable for other garden plants. For example, they can be attached to trees and rocks or hung in free draining baskets. By attaching wire weld-mesh to walls or fences with a suitable aspect, lots of hanging space can be obtained.

Pergolas also offer lots of high hanging space and the range of garden orchids increases greatly if you are prepared to bring the little darlings in under a polycarbonate roof in winter.

A common problem is where to put large orchids which have outgrown the shade-house. Many fanciers avoid larger species for this reason, but at that stage mine are turned out into the garden.

Plants should not be banished to the bottom of the garden however, to languish neglected, lacking sunlight and nutrition. It is no surprise that these plants don't flower.

Consider trees as hosts. Some epiphytes have specific preferences but many will adapt to any tree with rough bark. Casuarinas are particularly good hosts and I have grown many Laelias and native Dendrobiums this way. A rough barked palm tree also proved an unlikely but very suitable host.

Establish the best aspect for winter sun and temporarily tie the orchid to the trunk or main branch with pantyhose, string or nylon fishing line. A small pad of water retaining sphagnum moss over the roots helps in the early weeks but watering will be needed every few days until established. Remember to remove the ties before they cut in to the plant. If the roots have not taken to the bark within a few months, try another host.

Many epiphytes will prosper in a bark-filled wire basket in the fork of a tree, a situation not far removed from their natural habitat.

In Sydney many epiphytes will naturalise on large rocks given some shade in summer. Hardy native *Dendrobiums* such as *speciosum* (Yellow Rock Orchid) grow relatively quickly into large specimens requiring frequent repotting. However they can do well left to their own devices on a pile of old concrete chunks and bark.

Stanhopeas thrive in Sydney gardens. They prefer hanging baskets lined with coconut fibre under shady trees. They require regular watering but only minimal care and quickly grow into impressive specimens. The large colorful flowers appear through the bottom of the basket in mid-summer and are always a talking point.

Phaius tankervilleae is another spectacular and undemanding potted garden orchid which does not mind wet feet, being essentially a swamp orchid.

Epidendrums including crucifix orchids also naturalise and flower well in Sydney gardens, often in full sun.

Aerides also seem to enjoy an open environment. I have a *landarum* and a *renanthera* which are in full sun for at least half the day year-round. They are fairly large orchids and are climbing out of their pots up two of our wooden pergola posts. The roots have green tips and are hanging on tenaciously with every sign of enjoyment.

Sobralia (*macrantha* x *xantholeuca*) is another larger species doing well in my garden. Again, it tolerates a lot of sun, but likes a tray of water underneath during summer. The reward is successive waves of large white trumpet flowers starting at Christmas.

The larger *Coelogynes* such as *lactea*, *tomantosa*, *ovalis* and *fimbriata* are quite hardy and do well in large baskets with good winter sun and some shade in summer.

There are some special problems with garden cultivation. Potted orchids are at the mercy of the elements and cold wet winters are a particular challenge. Defense from slugs and snails demands constant attention, especially as flower buds form. Keep orchids away from other garden plants prone to scale or other pests.