

Orchids FOR DUMMIES®

**by Steven A. Frowine and the
National Gardening Association**



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About the Authors

Steven A. Frowine first started growing orchids under lights when he was in high school. Since then, his love and sometimes obsession for orchids has continued to grow. He has tended orchids professionally as a horticulturist, when he worked in Hawaii at the National Tropical Botanical Garden and at Missouri Botanical Garden, where he was Chairman of Indoor Horticulture and managed one of the largest orchid collections in the United States — over 10,000 plants. Steve's greatest pleasure from orchids, though, has been growing them in his own home under lights and in windowsills, which he has done now for over 40 years.

Steve has a B.S. and M.S. in horticulture from Ohio State University and Cornell, respectively. He has had a long and rich career working as a professional horticulturist for premier botanical gardens in the United States and as an executive at top horticultural businesses including W. Atlee Burpee Company, White Flower Farm, and International Gardening Products. Steve is sought out as a lecturer and has delivered hundreds of lectures throughout the country. His presentations are noted for his excellent photography, his knowledge of the subject, and his sense of humor. He has appeared on various national TV shows and writes extensively, authoring many articles for horticultural trade and consumer magazines. His second book, *Fragrant Orchids*, will be released in the fall of 2005.

Steve is now president of his own horticultural consulting firm, where he works with various horticultural companies on marketing and public-relations issues.

The **National Gardening Association** (NGA), founded in 1972, is a national not-for-profit leader in plant-based education. Its mission is to promote home, school, and community gardening as a means to renew and sustain the essential connection between people, plants, and the environment. For more information on the National Gardening Association, visit its Web site at www.garden.org.

Dedication

To my mother, Janet, and my late father, Samuel, who encouraged me to pursue in my life and work what I loved and believed in.

To my loving wife, Sascha, who shares my passions and tolerates my obsessions.

Author's Acknowledgments

Many thanks are extended to Glen Decker, who served as the technical editor for this book. It is comforting to have someone with Glen's extensive experience and knowledge pore over my manuscript and lend his constructive, helpful criticism, as well as make sure the information presented rings true. To my Project Editor, Elizabeth Kuball, who greatly helped to mold and shape this book to be the best it could be, and to Tracy Boggier, my Acquisitions Editor, who helped me pitch this book to the folks at Wiley, more thanks.

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The orchid community of amateur and professional growers and orchid societies, who inform members and put on orchid shows, get accolades for their dedication and efforts. Many have been immensely helpful to me.

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Introduction

Believe it or not, orchids — the most glamorous and spectacular flowering plants in the world, nature’s true masterpieces — are easy to grow! You just need to give them what they need. And their requirements are not difficult to meet — adequate light, humidity, water, and ventilation. Sure, there are other nuances, like fertilizing, repotting, insect and disease control, but none of these are daunting. I’ve been growing and blooming orchids in my home for almost 40 years — mostly not in a greenhouse, but under lights or on the windowsill.

Helping you achieve success with these glorious plants is my pleasurable mission. If you follow the steps I lay out in this book, you *will* grow orchids that thrive. Everything in this book comes from many years of my own trials and errors — not from theories about what *should* happen or what orchids *might* need. Sure, I’m a professional horticulturist, but probably more importantly, I’m a hands-on, sometimes fanatical, home orchid grower. I don’t share with you anything in this book that I haven’t tried myself or am sure that works.

Years ago, the methods of orchid culture were well-guarded secrets, hoarded by commercial growers and private estate gardeners. That’s not the case here. This is a tell-all book where all secrets are revealed. So you can now enter this wonderful world of orchids without fear, knowing that you’re armed with the information you need to be successful and enjoy one of the most rewarding and fascinating, lifelong hobbies that you’ll ever experience — growing orchids.

About This Book

This book gives you all you need to know to grow, appreciate, and bloom orchids in your home — in a concise, easy-to-read manner. This family of plants is so humongous that you may be overwhelmed by the prospect of choosing and growing one of your own, so I show you only the groups of orchids that are the easier ones to grow. I also make a point of adding lots of illustrations and photos (most of which were taken by me) to show you what I’m talking about.

I want you to feel comfortable with these dazzling plants and get to know them on a personal basis. Then you'll be eager to discover all their mysteries by slowing down your busy life to savor orchids' inimitable flowers, inhale their sensuous perfumes, and observe the unique construction of their roots and leaves.

Conventions Used in This Book

Orchid names are in Latin, which is a challenge for most people (except your high school Latin teacher) to pronounce and remember. Don't worry about it. Just get into these names gradually. Take some solace in knowing everyone else is struggling with them, too!

With such a complex group of plants come names and jargon to match. This aspect of orchid growing is what scares most people off. Don't let this happen to you! They're just names and words that scientists have assigned to plants because they had to call them something. Think of orchid names as another language that you can figure out as you go along — with my help. In this book, I make the jargon as simple as possible and explain each term in a way that is easy to understand.

Foolish Assumptions

In writing this book, I've assumed a few things about you and your experience with orchids. At least one of the following applies to you:

- ✔ You've seen orchid plants in bloom for sale in the garden section of your local home-improvement store or garden center and you've always wanted to give them a try.
- ✔ You purchased your first orchid and are wondering, "Now what?!"
- ✔ You saw orchids at a flower show and you wonder if you can grow these exquisite flowers in your home.
- ✔ You've had some orchids for a few years, but they don't seem to be doing well and you can't get them to bloom again.
- ✔ You've grown some other houseplants successfully and are now ready to move up to orchids.

How This Book Is Organized

This book is organized into parts, each of which contains several chapters.

Part I: Welcoming Orchids into Your Life

In this part, I show you how orchids are different from other plants, what makes them so appealing, and where they're found in nature. You get tips on how to select the right orchid for you, which tools you need to grow them, and how you can fully enjoy their beauty in your home.

Chapter 1 tells you what makes an orchid an orchid, where they grow, where they're found, and how they're named. Chapter 2 helps you select the orchid that's just right for you and tells you how to give it basic care for its first days in your home. Chapter 3 gives you a rundown of the tools you'll need to be an amateur orchid grower. Chapter 4 helps you get the most out of displaying your orchid's beauty in your home.

Part II: The Basics of Orchid Parenthood

This is the nitty-gritty on the basics of orchid care.

Chapter 5 gives you the information you need to provide your orchids with the growing environment that they need to thrive. Chapter 6 addresses the important topics of watering and fertilizing. Chapter 7 eliminates your fears of repotting by giving you the detailed information you need. Chapter 8 guides you through various methods of multiplying the orchids you have. Chapter 9 shows you simple and safe ways to keep your orchids healthy.

Part III: The Best Orchids for Rookies

Here I introduce you to the most popular and easiest orchid to grow. I've included plenty of pictures so you can see what they actually look like.

Chapter 10 deals with the easiest of all the orchids, the moth orchids. I also introduce you to some of its recommended relatives. Chapter 11 covers the colorful and favorite cattleyas and their relatives. Chapter 12 covers slipper orchids. These are among the easiest to grow with handsome foliage. They have one of the largest groups of ardent admirers. Chapter 13 is about the oncidium group, which is rapidly rising in its popularity because it's easy to grow and because it produces many fantastically patterned flowers. Chapter 14 tells you about more orchid gems that are not quite as common but are worth the search to find.

Part IV: The Part of Tens

This wouldn't be a *For Dummies* book without a Part of Tens. This is where you can turn when you're short on time but still want a lot of useful information.

Chapter 15 helps you select the easiest orchids to start with. Chapter 16 tells you the ten most common ways orchids are killed and how to prevent these plights. Chapter 17 gives you answers to the ten most common questions asked about orchids and their culture. Chapter 18 informs you about the ten most common reasons that orchids don't bloom.

Appendix

You may be fortunate enough to be close to an orchid grower or supplier, but if you aren't, don't despair — I list some excellent mail-order providers in this appendix. Some have paper catalogs and others offer their plants online.

Although more home centers and garden centers are carrying orchid supplies, you may have trouble finding some of these materials. For this reason, I include some resources that are dependable.

Orchid societies offer valuable services, from providing places to meet, talk about, and display orchids, to producing excellent publications and sources for information. In the appendix, I also list contacts for the key organizations. They'll lead you, if you're so inclined, to others.

Icons Used in This Book

I use the following icons throughout the book to point out particularly important information:



When you see this icon, you can be sure to find information that will make you a more successful orchid grower.



This icon points out some common pitfalls you want to steer clear of when growing orchids.



This icon highlights information worth remembering when you're working with your orchids.



Take it or leave it. This icon points out information that may help you win your next game of Trivial Pursuit or convince you that you could be the next *Jeopardy!* champion, but it's not essential to your understanding the topic at hand.



When you see this icon, you can be sure to find a particularly fragrant orchid.

Where to Go from Here

This book is set up in digestible, stand-alone pieces. Pick out sections that interest you most and read them first. You can bounce around in the book any way you please.

If you already have orchids but are having difficulties growing them, you may want to start out with Part IV. It gives you quick answers to common problems.

Trying to decide which orchid you should start with? Look at Chapters 2 and 15. To get jazzed about orchids, check out the section of color photographs. And if you have an orchid that is in dire need of repotting, skip right to Chapter 7.

Part I

Welcoming Orchids into Your Life

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



"This orchid pollinates by attracting flies with a stinky odor and fuzzy black warts on its petals. Sometimes the flies get confused when Russell's around, but most of the time they're just fine."

In this part . . .

Growing orchids could change your life — forever! It has for me and many people. No other plant family offers the number and diversity of breathtaking and intriguing flowers that orchids do. When you discover that you can actually grow these exotic plants in your home and that they aren't expensive, your resistance will be lowered and your chances of catching the extremely contagious but wonderful obsession or addiction called the "Orchid Bug" are high.

In England and the rest of Europe in Victorian times, these fabulous plants used to be only for the eyes of royalty or well-heeled aristocrats because of the one-time astronomical prices that they commanded at flower auctions. They were grown in elaborate and costly glasshouses, usually by a staff of professional growers.

How times have changed! Orchids have entered the mainstream. They're now the second most popular pot plant in the world and are gaining quickly on the leader (poinsettia)! Because of new techniques and modern growing methods, award-quality orchids are available to everyone at prices lower than ever before. You can buy an orchid plant in full bloom for less than you would pay for a bouquet of flowers from the florist.

In addition to the orchids of today being less expensive, they're also much easier to grow. Most of them have been bred to be compact and easy to grow and flower in windowsills and under artificial lights. Some bloom more than once a year and others are fragrant. And with thousands of hybrids and new ones being produced all the time, there is an orchid that will strike anyone's and everyone's fancy.

Join me in this part as I introduce you to this marvelous plant family. I show you what makes an orchid an orchid, why you just have to give these exceptional plants a try, and help you make decisions about which orchids are best for you and your growing space. This is going to be a fun journey, so let's begin!

Chapter 1

Getting the Lowdown on Orchids

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting to know orchids
 - ▶ Deciding whether orchids are right for you
 - ▶ Knowing what to do for your orchids each month of the year
-

You're about to enter the wonderful world of orchids. You're in store for an exciting adventure! This is the largest plant family on our planet with an estimated 30,000 wild types (species) and many more man-made varieties. No other plants can compete with orchids for their power to seduce and bedazzle the most jaded plant lover with their fantastically beautiful flower colors, shapes, and textures, and heady and sensuous perfumes.

Understanding What Makes an Orchid an Orchid

You can easily tell when a rose is rose, but orchids are quite a bit more complex and varied when it comes to their flower shapes and the construction of their leaves, stems, and roots. In Part III, I give you lots of information on flower, leaf, and stem construction of specific orchids. In this chapter, I talk generalities.

Certainly the flamboyant colors of modern orchid hybrids are a standout and are the primary reason these plants are so treasured. But there are so many different types of orchid flowers, so the question is, "Which one is typical?" There is really no correct answer to this question. Many people think of the cattleya-type orchids (see Chapter 11), while others may picture moth orchids (see Chapter 10).

To get a better idea how orchid flowers are constructed, take a look at a typical cattleya flower and compare it to a more ordinary

flower, a tulip (see Figure 1-1). Table 1-1 shows some of the major differences between these two flowers.

So what makes an orchid an orchid? The column. This fused sexual structure located in the middle of the flower is what separates the orchid from all other plants.

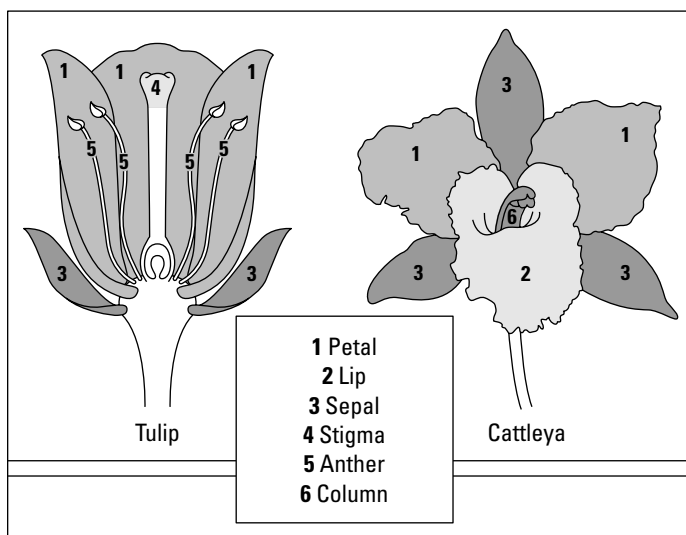


Figure 1-1: Comparing a cattleya flower with a tulip flower.

Table 1-1 Differences between Tulip and Orchid Flowers		
Flower Part	Tulip	Orchid
Petals	The most obvious part of the flower and what makes a tulip look like a tulip.	A very prominent part of the flower but comprises only half of the show.
Sepals	Hardly noticeable in the tulip flower, especially after they open.	Very striking in many orchid flowers. Can be as brightly colored as the petals.
Lip or labellum	Not found in the tulip.	Usually a very showy part of the orchid flower. Actually a modified petal.
Anther and stigma	The two sexual parts of the tulip. The anthers are male reproductive organs and the stigma is the female part.	These separate organs are not found in the orchid; instead, orchids have a column in which the male and female parts are fused.
Column	Not found in tulip.	Only found in orchids.

Knowing Where Orchids Come From

About 80 percent of orchids are from the tropics in both the New World (Central and South America) and the Old World (Asia and Malaysia). A smattering can be found in North America and Europe.

The ones that grow in your home, though, are all of tropical or semitropical origin. They mostly hail from areas of high rainfall and humidity and enjoy tropical to above-freezing temperatures during the winter.

Orchids are divided into two major categories based on where they grow. Those that are commonly found clinging to branches of trees are called *epiphytes*; those that thrive growing on or in the ground are called *semiterrestrials* and *terrestrials*.



So how can you tell the difference between the two? Many of the terrestrial roots are hairy, like those found in the slipper orchid (see Figure 1-2). Epiphytes have thick roots (called *aerial roots* because they're frequently suspended in the air), which are covered with a silvery material called *velamen*, which can absorb moisture from the air like a sponge (see Figure 1-3).

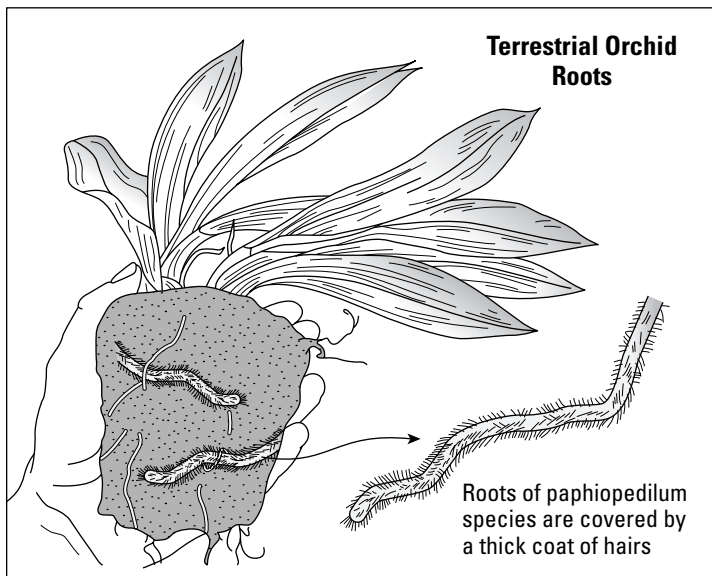


Figure 1-2: Terrestrial and semiterrestrial orchids, like most slipper orchids, frequently have hairy roots.