

# TEN COMMANDMENTS FOR AN ORCHID GROWER

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(Based on an article by Ernest Hetherington published in Volume 46-3 (1982) of the *Orchid Digest*.)

**P**ERHAPS LIKE THOSE of the Bible, the following ten commandments for orchid growing might be a good code to live by, but—just like the biblical ones—may be overlooked or broken. In orchid growing, how much we know and how long we have been growing is of little consequence if we do not practice what we know.

## 1. *Learn Basic Good Culture.*

A well-grown average plant will give you better flowers than a fine variety poorly grown. The genetic makeup of a plant cannot be changed, but its full potential can only be realized through good culture. As simple as it may sound, you must learn the basic requirements of various genera to grow them, including how and when to water, light intensity and photoperiod (hours of light per day), and how much and how frequently to fertilize.



house growing. Still, others may need the changing environment that a greenhouse offers, such as seasonal changes in day length and temperature, which may be more challenging to provide in the more consistent conditions of your home—not to mention the dryness created by heating and air conditioning.

Regardless, make sure you can establish the conditions required by the kinds of orchids you want to grow. If you spend money to begin your orchid collection without first ensuring you have proper facilities, cliches like “getting the cart before the horse” and “pouring money down a rat hole” come to mind. Not only will you do better with your plants by ensuring they have the environment they require, but you will also feel rewarded by your success and develop confidence in your ability to expand your collection and try new varieties.



Do not continually experiment with new mixes, feeding procedures, and all sorts of techniques until you have learned the basics. Develop good relationships with growers who have demonstrated their cultural prowess and whose opinions you respect; listen to them. Wait until you have proven your competence in the basics of good orchid culture before you set out to revolutionize the orchid world.

## 2. *Provide Proper Growing Facilities.*

A greenhouse may provide many advantages, such as the ability to maintain a humid environment and good airflow. However, many growers do a great job growing on windowsills and under lights. In fact, it can be argued that growing under lights in the home provides a more stable environment than a greenhouse, which is subject to the vagaries of the weather that can influence humidity, light, and temperature. Some orchids may be adaptable to either in-home or green-







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### 3. *Learn Disease Identification and Pest Control.*

The best way to prevent the spread of viruses and other diseases among your plants is to buy single-edge razor blades to do any cutting. This includes removing dead or diseased tissue or dividing a plant. You should even follow this protocol to remove blooms for use as cut flowers. Discard the blade into a sharps container. The best way to ensure that cutting tools are disinfected is by using a flame. The safest way to flame your tools is a torch with a self-igniting trigger. The flame is not kind to the tool, but you can use it immediately for the next plant. Remember: only ONE plant per tool before disinfecting or one razor blade per plant. Seek out published material on aseptic technique topics and become informed.

Do not introduce obviously diseased or infested plants into your collection. If a condition is treatable, keep the affected plant or plants away from the rest of your orchids until you can clean them up and ensure they will not infect your entire collection. If it's not a rare or expensive plant, consider just tossing and replacing it.

Learn basic pest control, particularly of the various scales, mealybugs, and mites that most typically affect orchids. There are many pesticides and home remedies for addressing these pests. For individual plants, a cotton swab dipped in rubbing alcohol can be used to remove scale or mealybugs, but eradicating them from a substantial number of plants would more likely involve treating with a pesticide. BE CAREFUL! Follow directions and learn which ones are appropriate for the pest you are trying to eradicate. Learn which ones are

appropriate for your situation. What might be suitable for greenhouse use may be inadvisable for use in your home. You do not want to make yourself, your family, or your pets ill—or worse—because you used something toxic in your living environment.

Beware of snails and slugs that can devastate your orchids, particularly those with softer leaves, new growth, and flowers. There are baits available for them, or if the damage is localized to one or a few plants, you can simply examine your plants after dark with a flashlight and pick the culprits off your plants and dispose of them. Mice and rats can also inflict severe damage on orchids. Keep your traps handy.

### 4. *Buy Good Stock.*

Do not be “penny wise and pound foolish” by trying to fill your growing area too quickly and too cheaply. You get what you pay for. Many orchids can be had at very affordable prices from reputable sources, including both large commercial nurseries selling mass-produced clones and smaller nurseries that specialize in particular lines of breeding that might not be available



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from mainstream sources. Orchid shows and orchid society auctions and sales are good places to pick up plants from both commercial vendors and hobbyists selling unusual plants from their private collections. If you have inexpensive plants on which you learned and developed your cultural expertise, phase them out, and upgrade your collection. An assortment of high-quality varieties can be more rewarding than a group of run-of-the-mill plants.

### 5. *Watch for “Creeping Obsolescence.”*

An orchid collection is ever-changing. Your interests do not remain the same. What you liked yesterday will not be your favorite tomorrow. As you build your collection, you will find your tastes becoming refined and selective. Keep in mind that you have just so much space, time, energy, and money to spend.

Get the most satisfaction and pleasure from your orchids. If you have plants that you know are diseased or not doing well, get rid of them! Make sure that every plant produces well and gives you the blooms you desire. If you have cattleyas, count the growths on your mature plant. How many of them have flowered? Most should have; otherwise, the plant is a non-blooming boarder. Although some orchids are grown primarily for their foliage, most are not. Do you have a plant that won't flower, but you are determined to get blooms from it? Give it a fair trial under varying conditions. If it still doesn't flower, get rid of it! Another plant is waiting to take its place and reward your efforts. Do you have a plant that flowers but produces blooms of inferior quality? Have you actually divided it and have extra divisions? Give them away to beginners or as gift plants. Make room in your collection for better-quality plants. Do you have seedlings from community pots repotted multiple times that never seem to thrive despite what you do for them, whereas some of their siblings from the original flask or compot are substantially larger and doing well? Throw the weaklings out and give your space to the ones that are thriving. Keep upgrading your collection, and you will get more pleasure from it. It costs no more to grow nice orchids than it does to grow poor ones!

#### 6. *Beware of Gift Plants.*

This is related to several of the other categories. If you are just starting, beware of the plant your neighbor gave you that he or she could not flower. Be sure the gift is a plant worthy of your attention. Most plants you win from various drawings by your orchid society are likely to be of excellent quality from reputable growers. However, beware of plants sometimes donated by a well-meaning amateur who is not cognizant of the presence of diseases such as viruses or pests on the plant. The expression "Sometimes a gift is a thing you do not get" is very apt when it comes to a plant that is difficult to bloom, unthrifty, diseased, or carrying hitchhikers.

#### 7. *Specialize.*

The orchid family is large and highly variable, offering many directions in which to develop a collection. Of course, the first rule should be, grow what you like. You may be a purist who only grows species; indeed, the natural variety in the orchid world is sufficient to keep a grower's interest. However, you may be intrigued by the results achieved through hybridizing to expand the orchid palette. You might even derive pleasure from producing your own hybrids, raising the seedlings, watching them grow, and hoping for a winner. You may get satisfaction from having a collection of only select or awarded varieties, or you may wish to specialize in cymbidiums, paphiopedilums, cattleyas, phalaenopsis, or some other genus. You may get more pleasure if your collection includes some variety and grow multiple genera with compatible growing requirements. You

will find that even someone who says they focus on one genus will have a few plants of other genera in their collection because they found them interesting.

#### 8. *Learn a Little about Orchid Names and Watch Your Labeling.*

You will get so much more pleasure from your orchid hobby if you know a little about orchid names. How are they named? How are they registered? You can find the accepted name for different species at the World Checklist of Selected Plant Families (WCSP). You can enter a genus name and find all the species within that genus. The list of all registered orchid hybrids is found at The International Orchid Register.

Maintain the labels in your plants, since a named variety carries more value than one lacking its identification. It is disappointing to see plants with labels that are no longer legible or that have lost their tags, since there is no way to know with certainty what they are, particularly if they are not in bloom. Many growers put two labels in every pot to prevent a lost tag. Use a pencil, permanent ink pen (with a fine or ultra-fine point), or label printer to ensure that the label remains legible.

#### 9. *Build a Good Orchid Library.*

The pleasure and success you achieve with your orchid collection will be in direct proportion to your knowledge of your plants and their requirements. Learning how to distinguish different genera or various species or groupings within a genus makes growing orchids even more interesting.

In the digital age, information is as close as your computer screen, including information about almost every aspect of orchids. Useful resources online to help with the growing requirements include The Internet Orchid Species Photo Encyclopedia at <http://www.orchidspecies.com/>. The OrchidWiz Encyclopedia, with images and culture information, is very helpful and has a journal section where you can list all your orchids, including pictures and other information. The Members' Section of the *Orchid Digest* website has many articles on growing specific genera. Please check it out at [www.orchiddigest.org](http://www.orchiddigest.org).

However, especially for in-depth knowledge of a particular genus or other classifications of orchids (e.g., miniature species), and for unusual species requiring highly specific care and conditions, there is no substitute for the various specialty books available. These may be recent publications or classics containing timeless information on species' geographic distributions, habitat types, elevation, temperature ranges, rainfall levels—all indicative of the conditions the plants will require in cultivation. Then again, many books provide this information along with cultural information. Depending on the scope of your collection, a few good books may be all that are needed. (To learn which books will provide the best information for your preferred plants, refer back to Commandment 1: consult experienced growers.)





**10. Join Your Local Orchid Society.**

When you join your local orchid society, you receive many benefits. Monthly member meetings generally include a presentation by an invited expert, who will show images of well-grown and often unusual and/or very high-quality plants. The speaker usually provides valuable cultural information and “tricks of the trade” they have developed to help their plants grow better. There is generally a question-and-answer period during which you can also query them on specifics to help you with your own plants. Frequently, the speaker will provide a plant table with plants for either the raffle or for sale.

The personal contacts you make among fellow society members and visitors will also be of great value. Interacting and sharing information with others will multiply the enjoyment you derive from your hobby and invariably help you become a better grower. Your orchid society also opens up possibilities for becoming involved in shows, judging, plant auctions and sales, and other activities to enrich your orchid experience.

Orchid growing is a hobby that can provide life-long enjoyment. You can gain the most from your experiences with your plants if you bear in mind these basic commandments as a guide.\*

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