

FROM THE WINDOWSILL

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WE ALL ARE STILL struggling with the new 'normal' since the Coronavirus has caused significant changes in our lifestyles. For many of us, the need to remain sheltered in our homes has permitted a new evaluation of our surroundings and how we choose to spend our time. Orchid lovers are no exception. There seems to be a general rise in interest recently to try growing more plants in home environments. Why not add orchids to the mix?

Like many of my orchid friends, I grow most of my orchids in a greenhouse or outdoors, being blessed with the mild climate of Southern California. When something comes into bloom, I generally bring it into the house to appreciate the flowers and the achievement of coaxing the plant to produce them. But, since I'm spending much more time inside now and not breaking up the monotony with travels (not to mention the brutal heat this summer), I have been looking at actually growing more orchids indoors.... More growing area equals more orchids, doesn't it?

There are two ways to approach growing in a new environment. One can adapt the environment to suit the growing requirements of the plants, such as is done in a greenhouse, or one can branch out and select plants whose needs are compatible with the existing growing space. Both techniques will work, but the former might not be as feasible in the home. That is especially true if living space is shared with a non-orchid person.

To investigate what plants might do well with existing windows or light sources, one must determine the direction and intensity of the light, shape, and size of the area in front of the window that can accommodate plants, the air movement, ambient humidity, and temperature fluctuations close to the window. Windows can provide a microclimate for the plants, as the daylight temperature can be warmer than the main part of the room, while the temperature may be cooler at night, depending on the outside temperature.

The sunlight that comes through will be dependent on the direction that it faces, but direct sun can be mod-



Phalaenopsis Brother Golden Wave 'Crownfox' HCC/AOS

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ified by the distance that the plants are positioned from the window. For example, even though a phalaenopsis doesn't like direct sunlight, it can be successfully grown in a very bright window if positioned back a distance from the window to achieve more filtered light. You can also place a more light-loving plant in front to create some shade. More light-loving orchids can go closer to the glass. Ideally, a southern exposure will provide the most versatile spot. The sun is bright, but not directly on the plants. Be especially observant when introducing the plants to the new growing conditions. If the light is too bright, leaves can still burn.

A good starting point is to use a min/max thermometer to measure the daytime and nighttime temperatures. In homes that air condition in the summer and heat in the winter, lack of humidity may present a problem. Windows that can open are useful in growing. When opened at night (even just a crack), the lower night temperature may be sufficient to give the day/night temperature fluctuation needed by most orchids. Also, the relative humidity generally goes higher as the temperature drops. That is not an absolute, as in extreme temperatures of heat or cold, but is worth taking advantage of when available.

Increased humidity can be achieved by purchasing or making your growing trays. These are trays or pans that can hold water and have a grid over the top to provide a platform for the pots. Various materials can be placed over the tray. If you make your own, any air permeable grid can be used over the top, as long as it provides a solid support for the plants while humidity can evaporate around them. Examples can include fine hardware cloth or the plastic grids that cover fluorescent light fixtures. That may be more difficult to obtain since that style of lighting has lost some popularity. Anything that allows the humidity to pass through and provide a stable surface will work. There are always the traditional saucers with gravel, but that makes for an uneven surface, and the trays are far easier to keep clean. Another technique employed by a local grower, Donna Ballard, is to set cups of water between plants to raise the ambient humidity. Whatever technique works best for your space is fine, but added humidity is usually a must for healthy plants.

There are a wide variety of orchids that can be grown in the house. Generally, it is best to select those that do not require high light (unless supplemental lighting is provided) and prefer relatively moderate temperatures.



Phalaenopsis aphrodite



Ludisia discolor

Orchids need to be fed regularly with a balanced, diluted fertilizer. You can fertilize with every watering with ¼ strength of a 20-20-20 fertilizer.

Don't over-water, the leading cause of death for orchids. Once a week is, in most circumstances, often enough.

One last cultural note: plants grown indoors seem to develop salt build-up at the roots more than their cousins grown in greenhouses or outdoors. Periodic flushing in the sink will help keep the plants and roots happy. If possible, occasionally flushing with rainwater or moving them out in the rain for a bit will also do the trick.

Of course, the most widely grown are phalaenopsis as they are usually the easiest to find in stores, and many beautiful hybrids grow and bloom as smaller plants. Many of those plants are from novelty breeding lines that reduce the size of the plants and come in a variety of colors and markings, with some, even having fragrance.

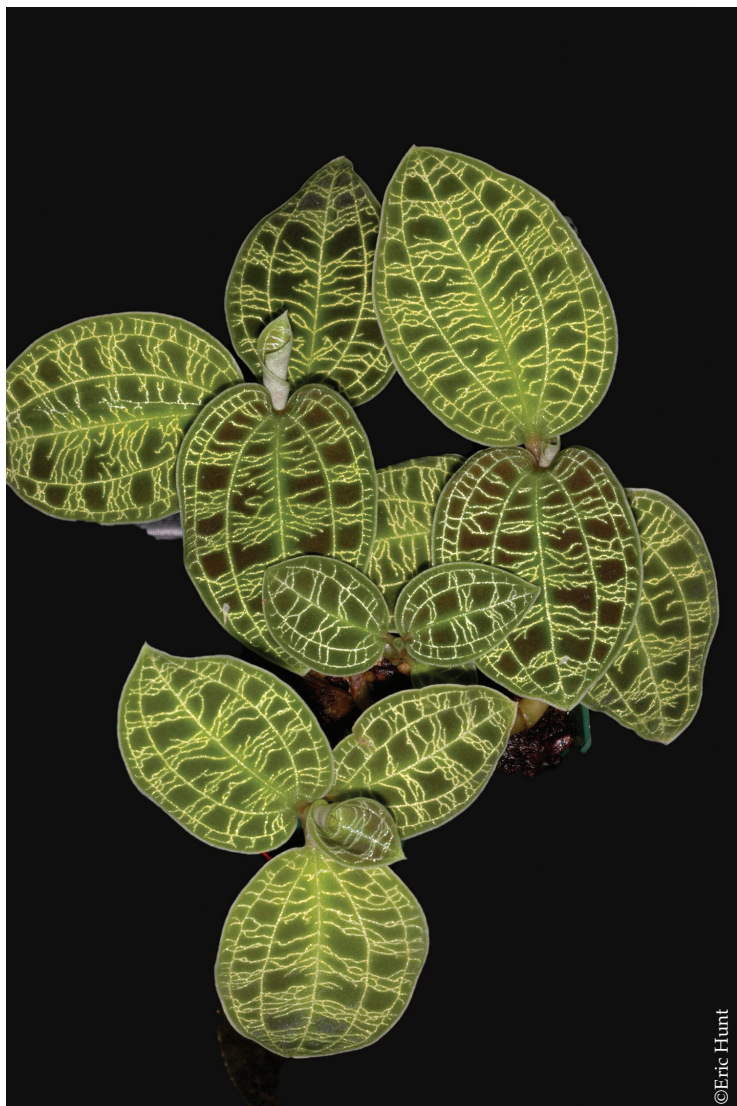
An often-overlooked group is the jewel orchids, many of which can be grown in a windowsill environ-

ment. Most orchid growers are familiar with the readily available *Ludisia discolor*, whose growing conditions are very similar to those of African violets. The foliage is very interesting when not in bloom and will produce upright inflorescences of lovely small white flowers.

Macodes petola has especially beautiful foliage. Contrary to most orchids, they prefer to have their roots relatively moist all the time and do well with household temperatures. The flowers are relatively small but are an interesting combination of peach and white on a peach-colored inflorescence.

Goodyera pubescens, or the "rattlesnake orchid," has deep green foliage with distinct contrasting patterns, reminiscent of rattlesnake patterning, and blooms with an upright inflorescence of small, unremarkable flowers. It likes well-drained soils and low light. *Anoectochilus roxburghii* is another jewel orchid with beautifully patterned foliage. It bears small, complex, fimbriated, white flowers on an upright inflorescence. The temperature requirements range from warm to cool seasonally.

Other jewel orchids that are mainly grown as foliage plants and can be successfully grown as houseplants



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Macodes petola



©Eric Hunt, grown by White Oak Orchids

Phalaenopsis lindenii

