

Phalaenopsis

Growing Phalaenopsis in the Toowoomba area

The name *Phalaenopsis* comes from the Greek *phalaina* (moth), and *opsis* (like), and so means 'resembling a moth'. Some species apparently are thought to resemble moths in flight.

Phalaenopsis distribution: More than 60 species and several natural hybrids are native to Sri Lanka and southern India, New Guinea, Tropical Asia, Pacific Islands and Northern Australia where they generally grow in areas that are moist and humid all year round. They often grow under dense to partial shade cover near streams in rain forests.

Most Phallies are epiphytes and occasionally lithophytes (with a few exceptions). Phallies lack storage organs that help them survive various climatic conditions. Therefore, most species require moisture and fertiliser for much of the year.

Growing Conditions: Most Phalaenopsis require intermediate to warm temperatures, moderate to heavy shade and high humidity. Warm growing plants require a night minimum temperature of 18° C and ideally a day temperature of 26° C, whilst Intermediate plants should have a night minimum of 13–18° C and day temperature of 26° C. It is important, however, that there should be a daily rise in day temperature by at least 5° C. However, they also require a drop in overnight temperature of 5-8° C to initiate flowering. The above quoted temperatures are ideal but because of the high cost of heating for the small home grower, the minimum temperature range could be reduced by 2-3° C. Some plants may suffer showing shrivelling of the leaves but they normally recover over the warmer months.

Containers: Phalaenopsis are usually grown potted in an open, bark based compost; more recently clear plastic pots are often used as the roots photosynthesize when exposed to light. If for no other reason it certainly allows the grower to see if the roots are in good condition.

Compost: This can be purchased premixed but most growers prefer to mix their own using pine bark, perlite, horticultural charcoal and coconut chips. Pine bark should be of good quality. Partly composted bark sold in nurseries as decorative top dressing is not suitable. Coconut husk chips should be well washed to remove any traces of salt and tannin and soaked overnight before use.

Suggested Mix:

- 2 parts medium bark
- 1 part coarse perlite
- 1 part horticultural charcoal
- 1 part chopped coconut husks

Watering and Humidity: As a rough guide, orchids in pots should be watered once or twice a week in summer and perhaps only every 2 weeks in winter. It is advisable to give plenty of water at a time and let the compost dry out before watering again; small amounts of water given frequently are not a good idea. Watering should be done with care – if water lodges in the crown of the plant it will rot quickly especially if the temperature is lower than ideal. Preferably water in the mornings (using water from a drum or such stored in the orchid house thereby keeping the water temperature the same as the plants) allowing the plants to dry before nightfall. Relative humidity of 70% is ideal and not below 50%. Keeping the floor wet is a popular way of controlling humidity.

Fertiliser: Orchids grown in bark need a high nitrogen fertiliser because the bacteria and fungi that break down bark use nitrogen. The source of nitrogen should be nitrates rather than urea. All should be revealed on the container. As a rule of thumb, if you fertilise regularly, every fourth watering should be clear water (preferably tank water) to wash the accumulated salts from the compost. Many growers use fertilisers at half strength.

Diseases: Pests are few but occasionally mealy bug make take up residence. Confidor seems to take care of them effectively.

General: Do not cut off inflorescences after flowering is over (if they remain green). They quite often produce a branch from a node and flower again, and sometimes even a kiki.

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TOOWOOMBA ORCHID SOCIETY INC

P.O. Box 7710 Toowoomba Mail Centre Qld. 4352

Email: tanbark_toowoomba@hotmail.com; Website: www.toowoombaorchidsociety.org.au

Meetings: Every fourth Friday of each month at 7.30pm, except September & December.

Venue: St. Paul's Hall, Cnr. James and Phillip Sts, Toowoomba