

FAQS

The American Orchid Society receives hundreds of orchid-related questions each month in a variety of media: telephone, fax, e-mail and, yes, even through the mail. Director of Conservation Ned Nash, who has answered the majority of these queries, has gathered the most frequently encountered questions here.

WHERE DO I CUT THE FLOWER SPIKE WHEN IT IS FINISHED?

The simple answer: When most orchids have finished blooming, the spike should be cut off with a sharp, sterile blade as close to the base of the spike as is practical. Of all of the more commonly available orchids, only phalaenopsis (the moth orchid) will re-bloom from its old spike. Phalaenopsis will generally re-bloom given a little extra care. The spike should be cut between the scar left by the first flower and the last node (swollen, jointed area on the stem). One of the lower nodes will then initiate a new spike that will generally produce flowers within eight to 12 weeks. Younger or weaker plants may not re-bloom. It is also a good idea to cut the spike off entirely by midsummer to allow the plant to grow strongly to produce next year's bloom.

HOW OFTEN SHOULD I WATER?

The simple answer: Once every four to seven days depending on season and dryness of the home. Allow the plants to approach dryness, gauged by pot weight or by the pencil trick (the point of a sharpened lead pencil, when inserted into the medium, will darken with moisture if the plant has enough water), and apply sufficient water so that it drains freely through the container. Never allow any potted plant to sit in its own water.

Flowering plants may require more-frequent waterings to make up for the greater burden of the flowers. Plants will require less water when not in active growth (generally winter months), and more while growing (generally spring and summer months). Increased frequency of watering will not make up for a poor root system. If roots are not plump and alive, repotting may be called for, or the plant may have been recently repotted by the vendor, in which case it will require raised humidity to compensate for the lack of supporting root uptake. Last, plants with thinner, softer foliage will generally require more water than those with harder, more succulent leaves. Plants with pseudo bulbs (such as dendrobiums and cattleyas) generally need to dry out more between waterings than do those without (such as phalaenopsis).

DO ORCHIDS NEED TO BE FERTILIZED WHILE THEY ARE IN FLOWER? WHAT FERTILIZER SHOULD I USE?

The simple answer: Yes, if anything, flowering plants need extra fertilizer. Your plants will need to be fertilized with a product appropriate to the medium in which they are grown. In general, plants in a bark-based mix will need a fertilizer high in nitrogen (usually in a 3-1-1 ratio), while a balanced fertilizer will do for all others (usually a 1-1-1 ratio). If in doubt, fertilize with the same balanced fertilizer you use for your other container plants. Orchids will do far better with too little fertilizer than with too much. The old adage, "feed weakly, weekly" is appropriate. Fertilize every week with a dilute solution.

WHEN SHOULD I REPOT?

The simple answer: When fresh rooting activity is expected (generally in the spring, or is very evident, generally every one or two years. Fresh rooting activity is best shown by the succulent green root tips on plump white roots. Often, the main flush of rooting will come from the base.