

Orchids in Texas

The array of colors, forms, textures and perfumes available in Orchid flowers is second to none. Many are relatively easy to grow under home conditions, or on your sun porch or patio. Even if you choose not to actually grow Orchids, they make excellent plants for home decoration – you can expect weeks of glory for the same price you might pay for an arrangement lasting only days. But beware, you may fall under their spell, and become a lifelong advocate and orchid hobbyist. You'll be amazed at the variety of exotic flowers that live and bloom right here in Texas.

Orchids are one of the largest and most highly evolved families of the entire plant kingdom, with at least 20,000 known species. Present day hybrids are cultivated in greenhouses, on window sills and under lights worldwide. Orchids are native to the tropics, certainly, but they also grow wild in North America and Europe; some species of Orchid is native to every state in the United States, including Alaska.

Orchids are hardy, long-lived plants that thrive in a variety of conditions. Like any plant, orchids require care. But they respond favorably, even eagerly, to proper treatment, and reward their caretakers by blooming luxuriantly for, at times, weeks and months on end. You do not have to grow Orchids in a greenhouse. When selecting plants, choose those that will survive in the environment that you have to offer.

Some Orchids bloom once a year, others bloom several times a year – and some even bloom continuously. How long the blossoms last depends on the type as well as cultural treatment. Blooms of *Cattleya* hybrids may last one to four weeks on the plants. Those of the genus *Phalaenopsis* commonly last from one to four months. Some Orchids are so powerfully scented as to perfume an entire greenhouse or living room. A few fragrances defy description, while other mimic familiar aromas – raspberry, coconut, lilacs and citrus. Others have no scent, but rely on shape and color to attract insects or birds for pollination, thereby continuing the life cycle of the species.

Orchids are not all the same – ranging from thimble-size to a twenty-foot tall specimen. Blossom size ranges from no larger than a mosquito to dinner plate size.

Orchids are not parasites. In nature, many orchids cling to trees and bushes as a growth habit, but they take nothing from the host plant, and do not injure it in any way. Orchids that grow on trees are called epiphytes or air plants. Since most Orchids are epiphytes they do not require soil; they can be grown in tree bark (fir or redwood), crumbled charcoal, large perlite, pebbles, tree fern or on cork plaques.

Orchids are no harder to grow than other ornamental plants. They need water, fertilizer, light and air – all in the right proportion and frequency. Modern reproductive methods make it possible now to enjoy plants at a reasonable price. Once a hobby for the wealthy, Orchids are now within the reach of any income.

Located in Austin, the Heart of Texas Orchid Society (www.hotos.org) is an affiliate of the American Orchid Society (www.aos.org), an organization of more than 30,000 members worldwide. Meetings are held at the Zilker Botanical Garden Center monthly, usually the first Tuesday. Visitors are welcome anytime!

