

Orchids 101

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Orchid Buying 101: Whys and Wherefores

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There are two types of orchid purchase. We may buy blooming orchids at a store to use them as decoration, as a hostess gift, or even to add to our collections or we may purchase online, during a greenhouse visit, or at a show. Pest and disease risks aside, we should ask ourselves some questions before making our selection. Are the plants well rooted and is the root system healthy? Are there green root tips in evidence? If the roots cannot be seen, do the leaves appear firm? If the roots are in poor condition, this will affect the flowers, and could ultimately impact the life of the orchid unless a purchaser intervenes. Be aware that a decorative pot may not have drainage holes. Such pots often hold orchids growing in plastic sleeves with water-retentive moss. Such plants need very careful attention to watering and may require immediate repotting.

Irrespective of colour preferences we should first check flower substance as this may affect flower longevity. Firm petals suggest that the blooms will last longer whereas thin papery blooms may not, something to consider especially if the plant is to be a gift. In a commercial greenhouse or at a show, prospective purchasers should have a chance to speak with the grower but also should be aware that the orchids may have been raised elsewhere for resale. Be prepared to describe your growing conditions to the seller so that they can respond to questions like "Can I grow this orchid well under my conditions?"

Learning what can grow well for you – Learn about the conditions (light, temperature, space) you can provide before making a purchase. With such information, you will be able to ask good questions about the potential success of a particular plant in your growing environment and so choose accordingly.

Learning how to pick a healthy vigorous plant – After checking for bugs, the next place to check is the root system. Without healthy roots, you are already facing an uphill battle to keep the plant alive. With permission of the vendor, touch the plant to be certain that it is firmly rooted. Next check the leaves and pseudobulbs. Firm unblemished foliage is a sign that the plant has been cared for. Pseudobulbs should be firm, plump, and show signs that growth has been progressively better. Bulbs will be getting bigger or remaining the same size rather than getting smaller with each subsequent growth. The odd nick or tear during transport is normal but stay far away from blemished leaves. Soft spots, concentric rings, dark blotches, and flecks can spell big trouble which you do not need. Notice that I have left flower quality last – on purpose. Look for flowers that please you but always bear in mind that healthy plant is more likely to provide your favourite flowers under your tender loving care.

Planning for the new arrival – If it is very cold or hot, windy or sunny, have a plan to get that precious plant home. Heat can be just as deadly as cold. Support the plant so that it cannot topple during the drive home. Shelter the leaves from direct sunlight. At home, have a place where the plant can both be admired and cared for and away from air conditioner or heater drafts, pet temptation and small children. Isolate new plants to be on the safe side.

Learning from the experiment – Take pictures, keep notes, and look up the name on the web. Your plant will need to adjust and this may take some time. If in doubt, please ask. Your orchid society is ready to provide advice.

Grower/hybridizer/seller/hobbyist language

Artificially propagated – In order to conform to conservation regulations, many species are now raised from seed, tissue-cultured, or propagated by vegetative division. Wild-collected plants (species) may still exist in trade. If uncertain, ask the seller if the plants have been artificially propagated.

Clone (Mericlone) – Many orchid plants can be propagated by means of tissue culture resulting in hundreds to thousands of plants identical to the parent.

Seedling – A seedling is an unbloomed orchid plant. Depending upon the kind of orchid and culture, it could take months to years before blooming happens.

Near blooming size – An unbloomed seedling or tissue cultured orchid.

Blooming size – A previously bloomed or as yet unbloomed orchid.

Species – A species is an unique organism that in nature reproduces its own kind by seed. Plants of the same species may strongly resemble each other but there may be smaller or larger forms, colour variants, and preferred growing conditions.

Sib or sib cross (species) – When two different plants of a species are hand pollinated with each other, their progeny are said to be sibs (siblings). Siblings will be the same species and will strongly resemble each other but may have different attributes such as vigour, flower number/colour or markings. Each sibling is an individual plant but the fact that the siblings arose from a hand pollination does not make them hybrids.

Self – When pollen from one flower is used to pollinate the same or another flower of that same plant, the process is termed 'selfing' and the label may read (× self). Both species and hybrids can be selfed. The name of the species or hybrid remains the same as that of the parent. Progeny resulting from a self-pollination will strongly resemble each other but will be distinct individuals.

Hybrid – When two different species, hybrids, or a species and hybrid are cross pollinated, their progeny are called hybrids. Primary hybrids combine traits from both parents but not all traits expressed may be desirable. Further hybridization may be needed to develop desirable traits such as flower colour, substance, number, or plant form. A hybrid may be named and officially registered as a Grex name.

Sib cross (hybrid) – When two different individuals of a single hybrid grex are used to produce seeds (cross pollination), their progeny will carry the same grex name as the parents yet may vary in flower and plant characteristics.

Intergeneric (hybrid) – When two different genera are hybridized, their product is called an intergeneric hybrid. The Genus may be named and officially recognized, as will be a new Grex name.

Happy orchid growing!