

Cymbidium Orchids for beginners – In six easy lessons

12. Growing for success

What is success when it comes to growing a cymbidium?

For an inexperienced grower it could be just getting plants to flower.

A more experienced grower might consider success to be getting better results than previously.

An orchid club member might wish to win prizes at shows and meetings.

Whatever your expectations, success will probably be in getting your plants to perform at their best and produce lots of high quality flowers. **Lots of flowers is success. Plants which do not flower are disappointing.** Different plants perform differently. Some grow and flower easily – others are more difficult.

One needs to get to know what plants are capable of producing to be able to judge their performance. It takes time to get the experience to be able to evaluate them. Be patient, but observant and ask other, more experienced growers, lots of questions.

Generally, a grower must provide good growing conditions to succeed. Neglected or abused plants flower poorly, or not at all.

It is really simple to succeed

1. Grow plants which are of a quality to meet your expectations. Continually cull and upgrade if you wish to improve.
2. In the 3 months or so after flowering, ensure all plants are in good condition (repot if necessary), water regularly, and fertilize with a balanced fertilizer regularly. Liquid fertilizer is good, as is organic fertilizer such as Seamungus. Slow release fertilizers such as Osmacote or similar work well if one does not have the time to spend to apply fertilizer often. Try to provide a temperature drop overnight. This assists the initiation of flower spikes.
3. Flower spikes are likely to appear, early in the new year. From that time fertilize with blossom booster type fertilizer (higher potassium). Water very regularly and try to cool plants in times of extreme heat. Identify the plants which have flower spikes and initiate a pest and disease prevention program to ensure the new flower spikes are not damaged. Start training the flower spikes so they look good when in full flower.

Simple, isn't it, but it takes time and planning to ensure your cymbidium is happy and wants to flower. The more you understand the needs of your plant, and provide the conditions needed, the more likely you are to have a good flowering the following year. The harder you work at looking after your plants, the luckier you will be.

13 Where plants come from

A new plant can be sourced in the following ways:

- **A piece of a species orchid.** A species orchid is found growing wild, in a jungle or similar.
- **A seedling,** is grown from a seed, produced by hybridizing two flowers. A seedling shares some of the characteristics of both of its parents. Each seedling is different to all of its siblings, similar to human brothers and sisters, from one set of parents.

- When a seedling finishes its first flowering season, it graduates to being a **cultivar** (or **variety**). It might be given a registered name or it might just be known by its parents' names, for example Valley Winter x President Gorbachev.
- A **division** is a plant produced from breaking a large plant into 2 or more
- A **back-bulb propagation**. This is a leafless bulb, removed from a large plant, when dividing it. A backbulb when removed and potted on, may produce side growths, which grow into green bulbs, and often flower in 2 years from removal from the mother plant.
- A **mericlone** is a clone of a particular plant. Mericlones of a plant should all be identical.

Most plants in modern collections consist mainly of mericlones and seedlings.

14a Sourcing new plants

Plants which are better than plants currently being grown are continually being developed and released. If one wishes to grow the best available constant culling of lesser performers and procurement of new varieties is necessary. Where to purchase the new varieties can be a problem for all. The following sources are common:

1. Inheriting or being given plants from a relative or friend.
2. Purchasing a plant from a general nursery, or garden centre.
3. From an Orchid Club trading table.
4. From a member of an Orchid Club.
5. Mail order.
6. From a specialty Orchid Nursery.
7. Your own breeding program

I will comment on the merits or otherwise of plants from the above sources. Good and bad plants are available from everywhere, so be wary. Additionally, there are good and bad people at every level. Try to assess the knowledge and honesty of the person supplying the plant.

1. From a relative or friend. If this person is knowledgeable about orchids this can be a good source. However, many plants are very old and tired. They may have been neglected at some time and most importantly, may have been grown under poor hygiene conditions. Plants with virus are abundant in old collections, or collections grown by people without the knowledge of virus prevention. There can some good plants in these collections but be wary.

2. General Nursery or Supermarket. Plants from this source can vary in quality greatly. It depends very much on where the nursery purchases their plants, how fresh they are, and the knowledge of the nursery attendant. Knowing what a healthy plant looks like, and the knowledge of plant names, is a huge advantage. I have seen nurseries where all the cymbidiums look terrible, even when newly delivered. They obviously come from a poor grower and are not worth buying. If they have been in the nursery for too long, they can deteriorate, and take a long time to recover. Plants from other nurseries, supplied by a specialist grower, can be a good investment. If you are a showbench grower, select your varieties carefully. Some good pot plant varieties, while easy to grow and flower, will have difficulty impressing judges at a show. Some good showbench varieties make their way to general nurseries and should be considered. Some nursery assistants have absolutely no knowledge of cymbidium growing. If they are honest, fine, but be careful of the used car salesman type. In summary, many general nursery cymbidiums are great, but be careful.

3. Orchid Club sales. Most plants from this area are good. Most clubs will remove inferior plants from their sales tables. Quality can still be variable, and the very best new varieties rarely make it to a trading table. Some clubs sell recently divided plants, often bare rooted. They are often relatively cheap, but should only be purchased if one has the knowledge to pot the plant, and nurture it to flowering size. Many plants like this, sold to newcomers, perish.

4. From an Orchid Club member This is a good way to get good, relatively new, well tested varieties. If you see something which you like at a show, or meeting, ask the owner if they have a piece to spare, or where they purchased it. If unavailable, suggest that when it is divided, you would like to acquire a piece. Get them to put a label on the plant, with your contact details. Sometimes the club newsletter will have a wanted and for sale section. Use it to get new varieties.

5. Mail Order There are many small (often backyarders) nurseries, offering cymbidiums for sale. There are also large, full time nurseries which have been established for a long time. Many have an internet web site where they can make photos and information about their plants available. EBay is now a huge source of cymbidiums of all sizes. Access to a computer and the internet opens up a huge market. Unfortunately, if one is not computer and internet competent, you will miss lots of opportunities to get access to plants which are only offered through this medium. If you cannot operate a computer, or are unsure of the internet, consider learning about it. It is not really hard. The hardest part is getting started. Training courses are available, and most orchid growers can often access a computer, owned by a relative or friend (often a child), who is usually only too happy to assist in getting computer trained. My 83 year old mother in law only recently started using a computer and the internet and it has changed her life. If she can do it, so can you.

Be careful in dealing with mail order nurseries. Again, there are good ones, bad ones and very bad ones. Check them out before sending money to them or giving credit card details.

A couple of other things to watch for.

1. Check the size plants are supplied. Many plants supplied are much smaller than what they advertise. EBay is good in that the buyer can report bad transactions and sellers always want good feedback. A potential buyer can easily view the feedback.

2. Check where the nursery sourced the material to propagate the plants they are selling. A common practice is to sell plants derived from clones, not from the original mother plant (Refer Part 3 on mericlones and pirating). Plants grown from pirated tissue in the flask are much more likely to be poor quality (different), than those originating from the genuine mother plant (often called primary mericlones). Ask the seller if he used an original piece of the mother plant to produce his mericlones. Also ask other experienced growers who have dealt with this seller whether they practice pirating tissue practices. Consider not buying plants derived from pirating. It hurts the whole industry and restricts the availability of new and superior varieties.

6. Specialty Orchid Nursery Most nurseries which have operated for a long time are very knowledgeable and good to deal with. The fact that they are still operating, means that they must be doing things well. Knowledge and honesty are extremely important. Also important is the quality of the plant material in the nursery, often collected over a very long period. Many of these nurseries have a good and comprehensive hybridising program, which is worth tapping into. Visit these nurseries regularly and check the stock on hand. Many first flowering seedlings are made available and are eagerly sought by knowledgeable hobbyists. It is common for a nursery to flower hundreds of a particular seedling and keep only a handful of the best varieties. It can be difficult for the nursery operator to choose the best varieties to retain. Many seedlings released might flower better on subsequent flowerings, perhaps even better than those retained at the nursery. Regular visits to these nurseries can be rewarded with access to special offers and the release of new varieties. Many

nurseries support Orchid Clubs and are regularly scrutinized by their members. Ask members of these clubs. They will tell you whether a nursery is worth visiting and purchasing plants from. They might also tell you which nurseries to avoid.

7. Your own breeding program I am often amazed when relative newcomers to orchid growing, embark on their own hybridizing program. The chances of being more successful than the long-term professionals in this field is low. Many newcomers select second rate parent plants and search for plants to mate them with, from other club members. They seem to ignore the likelihood that the population of plants they create will be inferior to those they could have obtained from established breeders. This often becomes apparent when they flower, four or more years after doing the hybridizing. Be very wary of relying on your own hybridizing program to improve your collection. You will probably need to grow at least 50 of each mating to just have a laboratory sow the seed pod for you. Small numbers of plants produced by a laboratory are relatively expensive. You might just be able to purchase better bred seedlings, in flask, from a professional nursery, cheaper than the small production run costs that you incur with your own breeding. If you must, grow some plants from your own hybridizing program, but be very selective and only use the very best parent plants available. Consider not putting all your eggs in the same basket, and grow even more plants from a successful, professional, breeding program.

Hybridizing

I will now try to detail how a seedling is produced. This process is referred to as hybridizing.

We mate 2 flowers, hoping to produce lots of baby orchids, which have new and desirable characteristics, better, or different, to both of the parent plants, and hopefully better than other plants other varieties available. Every year, thousands of seedlings flower for the first time. Many are disappointing, and no better than many plants currently grown. However, some are different and superior. These are what we are seeking. Over the years, we have improved the quality of cymbidiums very much. The new varieties are generally much better quality and better performed, than the plants of yesteryear.

A cymbidium flower has both male and female parts. The male part is 2 small balls of pollen, located under the pollen cap, at the end of the column. The female part which will receive the pollen, is a small cavity, located just behind the pollen cap. Pollen can be easily removed and transferred to the cavity of another, selected flower. If both parents are fertile (usually not triploid – refer Part 3), a seed pod may be produced. The stem of the flower, where the ovaries are housed, swells, and houses many thousands of very small seeds. The pod could be quite small for miniature varieties, or as big as a banana, for a large, standard sized flowers. The pod may take 12 months or more to fully mature. It usually splits and discharges thousands of seeds into the environment. In commercial production, we usually remove the pod, at about 7 months old, long before it splits. We sow the seed into sterile flasks, containing a special, jelly like, growing medium. Seed often takes 3 to 6 months to germinate, and small plants are produced in about 12 months from sowing. Some varieties germinate very poorly or take much longer to grow big enough to deflask.

Each seedling is different to all its siblings.

Producing new varieties is very exciting and can be very rewarding if superior varieties are produced. The use of quality parent plants, and an intimate knowledge of the genetics of the parent plants used, assists to create superior progeny. The use of second rate parent plants, or a lack of understanding of genetic combinations, is a sure-fire way to produce very poor results four or five years down the track.

14b Tips on sourcing your plants

Be sure that you purchase and grow plants which you like and that suit your expectations. Do not be hasty in acquiring new varieties. Too many growers choose new varieties which will disappoint when they eventually flower, often some years down the track. It is easy to be lured into growing new, prize winning, new releases.

Make sure you purchase the best available showbench plants (including showbench seedlings), if you are attempting to win prizes at your Orchid Club. If you just want lots of flowers to enjoy look at the best pot plant types available. If you want to cut your flowers choose superior cut flower varieties. Some varieties will perform well in all arenas, but not all. Choose wisely.

On the showbench, if your new plant happens to be a mericlone, there will be many other growers growing the same plant, all expecting to win a major prize when it flowers. You will need to grow it better than all those growers and be lucky enough for it to be at its best on judging day. Unless you are a very good grower, expect to fail more often than you succeed. Don't be too disappointed or frustrated.

14c Avoid buying plants on impulse. Spend time researching and talking to successful growers. Avoid believing everything you hear. There are lots of experts who live in the past or are not qualified to give advice. The quality of our cymbidiums is improving greatly every year. If you do not upgrade regularly, your collection will quickly become outdated. Unfortunately, there are also suppliers who offer plants which have little chance of being better than the varieties presently being grown, and certainly not good enough to compete in years to come. Many are produced from pirated tissue, which often produces inferior varieties. Some come from breeding programs, which are years behind the leading edge hybridizers. Be wary and ask lots of questions. **Seek out suppliers who you can trust and who are recommended by other successful growers.**

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