

Growing Orchids in an Apartment

My passion for growing orchids did not start until we had downsized from a large house on a bush block in “The Shire” to an apartment on the lower North Shore of Sydney. Our north-facing balcony/terrace was originally furnished with an outdoor table setting, a barbecue in the corner, and a lemon tree in a large pot.

I encountered “The Orchid Man” at our local market, a year or so after our move. I was tempted into purchasing a beautiful little orchid in flower, a *masdevallia*. The next month at the markets, I purchased two or three more orchids. That was the beginning of my obsession. Once orchids took over my life, they also took over the balcony. The barbecue was the first to go, then the lemon tree. Eventually, there just wasn't room for the table and chairs.

My balcony is now a restricted area. Access is only under strict supervision. Now, my life revolves around watering, feeding, dividing, and repotting orchids.

There are numerous challenges faced by the apartment orchid-grower: the most significant one being limited space. Although, I hear my more space-endowed backyard-growers, also complaining about lack of space!

I grow both exotic as well as native orchids on my balcony. The *murraya* shrubs, which grow in the planter box along the front of the balcony have become home to my twig epiphytes, and many other small mounted orchids. Some of my *Plectorrhiza tridentata* have established themselves on the twigs and branches of the *murrayas*, and are growing very happily there.

My small shady courtyard at the rear of the apartment receives no sun at all for several months each year. This courtyard houses my shade-tolerant orchids: e.g. *Sarcochilus falcatus*, *Sarco. olivaceus*, and a number of terrestrial orchids. They seem to grow quite well under my potted camellia plants, despite the current wintery conditions. The courtyard is also useful for placing some of my orchids during the summer; when the sun is too vicious on my balcony. However this necessitates transporting orchids back and forth through the apartment, when the seasons change.

Like most of my orchid-growing friends, I have too many orchids. Many of the ones I acquired, having been assured that they were small-growing, are now enormous plants; and bursting out of their pots.

I have become very creative in utilising every inch/centimetre of growing space. I have wires strung along the length of the balcony, where I hang many of my orchids on long wire hangers. I have two large benches on casters, upon which I have my smaller orchids, growing in their pots. I have tall stands on which I hang my trailing orchids. On the few solid wall spaces, I have mesh panels from which I hang smaller orchids, using 2-hook wire hangers. I have orchids in troughs, hanging over the balcony railings, and on the ground under the murrayas. In other words, I have orchids everywhere possible!

Challenges

A major challenge for the balcony orchid-grower is dealing with destructive winds.

My balcony faces north, which gives excellent light. However, this aspect exposes my collection to the often vicious north-westerly winds. I have lost a number of orchids to strong gale-force winds, which have on occasion whipped the plants right out of their pots; never to be seen again. We are fairly close to the harbour and air movement is constant; providing a buoyant atmosphere, which the orchids appreciate.

Fortunately my balcony is protected from the southerly gales, which frequently lash Sydney. I keep a keen “weather-eye” on the forecasts to check on wind direction, and stormy weather.

Although receiving excellent light from the northerly aspect, my orchids do not receive direct sunlight overhead. There is a ceiling above most of the balcony, which gives protection from the elements, and prevents the orchids from receiving direct sunlight from above. This results in plants, which grow towards the light, necessitating staking, and rotating regularly.

As well, the sun can create problems during hot summer weather, when shading is vital to prevent sunburning. I have installed, at considerable expense, blinds which can be operated at the press of a remote control device. These blinds also provide protection from the wind. However, chafing of the wires in strong winds has necessitated the replacement of some of these wires; at more expense. My solution has been to fasten each blind down with

Occi straps TM when the wind is strong. This prevents the movement of the blind up and down the wires.

Advantages

A wonderful, unexpected benefit of creating such a lush environment on my balcony, and in my little courtyard, is the regular appearance of a multitude of little creatures.

Some of these are very welcome, and some can create problems. I have to contend with the usual slugs, snails, caterpillars, the dreaded dendrobium beetle and even the occasional rat. My life has been enhanced by the visitation of other fauna.

The little blue wrens, which flitted through the murrayas, were chased away by the bossy scrub wrens. These scrub wrens set up home in a tray in my very small (Aldi special!) greenhouse. This greenhouse was heated during the winter with a reptile lamp. The scrub wrens really liked the warmth of the greenhouse, and they created a beautiful cone-shaped nest where they raised two little babies. The parents turned our apartment into an extension of their territory, and hopped around on the carpet checking for edible morsels. If they discovered a mirror or screen, they would tap at their reflections to either admire themselves, or repel the perceived intruder. We occasionally, still find their little calling cards in obscure corners!

When the chicks eventually fledged, the entire scrub wren community arrived one morning, to encourage the babies out of the nest. The cheer squad remained until the fledglings took off. The blue wrens have now returned, and they regularly check every orchid meticulously for possible insect delicacies.

Lizards also live on the balcony. They run along the wall and bask in the sun amongst the orchids. I discover their egg shells under pots and in difficult-to-reach corners, under assorted orchid paraphernalia. Charming little geckos have taken up residence in the courtyard.



Possoms! I have a love-hate relationship with the ring-tails, with their little round bodies and big eyes. We've had several possums that have wished to set up home on the balcony. The first was a very cute little possum that liked to eat all the new shoots and buds on my orchids. It greeted us like an eager

puppy, when we returned home after an evening out. I would frequently find it curled up in one of my orchid pots after causing devastation to the orchids. This little possum used our bedroom as a shortcut from the courtyard at the back of the apartment, to the balcony at the front. I discovered it one night with a bundle of Spanish moss wound up in its tail, traversing the apartment. No doubt, it was on the way to building a nest!

The current ring-tail is munching the buds on my camellias. Fortunately, it would appear, that it doesn't fancy my orchids, thus far! Our latest and longest staying resident is a Peron's tree frog which greets me when I go out on the balcony. It surprises me sometimes when I move a pot, and it provides good company when I am tending my orchids. We love to hear its distinctive call at unexpected moments.



I once experienced an alarming "frog incident" when a frog took shelter in my waterproof trousers, which were hanging up to dry in the courtyard. My yelps could be heard from afar! I now check thoroughly before donning my gear.

Culture

Because of these regular "guests" and my environmental concerns, I don't use any toxic chemicals on my orchids. I check regularly for insect pests, and either remove them by hand, or use "natural" products when required. Fortunately, I seldom encounter fungal issues, probably because of the constant air movement.

My partner has installed an overhead sprinkler system, which I use occasionally. This is connected to a timer, which we set when we are away for any length of time. However, I generally hand-water my orchids to ensure that all of them are watered adequately. I fertilise my orchids regularly, using a fertigator and a bucket in which I have dissolved the fertiliser. Currently, my fertiliser is Peters Excel CalMag Finisher TM. I also regularly use a seaweed solution on my plants, and have more recently commenced using slow-release granules when I am repotting.

I use a bark mix for most of my orchids, to which I add scoria or pebbles, and sometimes perlite. For those plants in need of some extra TLC, I use sphagnum moss. I mount many of my Australian native species orchids on cork mounts.

I have resorted to using the kitchen bench to repot my orchids! I do have a potting table on the balcony. However, it is so crowded with orchids that it has become unusable for its original purpose! At times, my kitchen resembles a nursery, with potting mix, pots, plants, etc. on every available surface. I also grow several of my warm-growing orchids in the warmth of the kitchen.

Growing orchids is a high-maintenance hobby, but a very rewarding one.

Growing orchids in an apartment requires a great deal of effort, but it brings a great deal of pleasure. Despite the restrictions of space and other difficulties, I have managed to produce a number of award-winning orchids which is very encouraging!

When I emerge from the balcony in my wet-weather gear, after watering and feeding my orchids, drenched to the skin, and with fertiliser in my hair; I often wonder why I put myself through all this hard work!

On warm, sunny days when my orchids are looking wonderful, and I see fresh new roots and buds, then I know it's worth all the effort.



Dockrillia teretifolia 'Yatte Yattah' HCC/AOC 2008
Champion Native Species Orchid – St Ives Orchid Fair 2008, 2009 & 2010