

GROWING ORCHIDS IN A SMALL AREA OR BALCONY

I have loved orchids since I was a small child. To be honest, I'm not sure I ever had a choice, as my father was an enthusiast. Some of my earliest memories are of orchid nurseries; walking in the cool of the greenhouses and staring in wonder at all the delicate beauty around me. I was left to explore, while my father would chat to the nurseryman for what seemed like hours; fascinated by these ephemeral blooms in all the colours of the rainbow. I especially loved phalaenopsis, and would constantly pester dad to buy one. I was always told no; they won't grow where we lived. Turns out he was wrong, but that is a story for another time.

Well, as you all know, once bitten by the orchid bug, it is only a matter of time before you are compelled to start to collect them. My first foray into orchid growing was as a newly-wed, in a newly purchased home in Lapland, Sweden. Living in the frozen north of Sweden, I was limited to what species were available. Also, what would grow without a pretty serious set-up, which channelled my attention towards my childhood dream flowers, phalaenopsis.

Now, Swedish houses are all equipped with deep shelves along every window; usually with a radiator underneath. This is a fairly easy environment to start experimenting with these beautiful flowers. However, once I had one orchid, my collection slowly expanded to cover every possible surface. Sadly, I had to leave all this beauty behind, when I emigrated to Australia with my family. It wasn't long before I was back to my old ways.

Once again, my orchid collection started to grow. It began in a modest way but steadily continued to grow. As you, my fellow collectors and enthusiasts are aware, each orchid has its own beauty and subtle differences. You just need to have more. This became such a frequent occurrence, that my husband would roll his eyes every time he saw me walk in with another boxful (yes, boxful) of phalaenopsis. I soon covered all the available space on the tables and shelves, on the small balcony/veranda that was under 90% shade cloth. Every suitable inside space next to a window was covered. My husband and family would complain to me; they could no longer use the table or veranda outside. I needed to do something about my bloody plants! My hubby threatened removal, and or destruction of my babies. Truth be told, he looked and sounded pretty serious. I started to worry for their safety, so a solution needed to be found asap.

Now as we all know, as collectors and growers, space is our most precious commodity. If I want more orchids, which of course I did, I would have to come up with some creative solutions! When working with a limited floor area, the only sensible and feasible way is to go up. A vertical garden has long been acknowledged as the most efficient use of a small space. However, I had to work out how to translate it to best fit my situation.

The first step was looking into how these plants grow in nature. Phalaenopsis, which make up the bulk of my collection, are a pendant grower. This means that the leaves like to hang downwards. This is not how we usually cultivate them in the home environment; with the exception of mounted specimens. Now, I didn't really want to mount every one of my 80+ plants. I considered hanging the pots on a trellis-like frame. However, this still failed to allow for the pendant-growing nature. My solution was to design and build my own frame.

So, I got to sketching. This is what I came up with: a multi-level frame, with a wire cable and an angled piece of timber, to prevent them from swinging around too much. There are trays underneath to catch water overflow, and help keep humidity

high. I found that once I hung my orchids up; it was so space efficient. I had room left over. My plants, and marriage, were saved!





That was only the tip of the iceberg. Not only did I get the right growing angle, I now also had better air circulation, more light per plant, better drainage, and consequently less disease. My phalies loved it! They instantly all started sending out new leaves and roots in a frenzy of growth; which was unexpected, but was welcomed. As a bonus, a few plants that hadn't flowered last season even started growing out-of-season spikes. I was so amazed. I chastised myself for not doing this sooner.

The phalaenopsis are still happily hanging there. I have only had one plant knocked off (by my curious dog); and one newly potted plant fell out of its pot during a very windy storm. They live out there year-round, including over winter. Winter here, on the mid-North Coast of New South Wales, is fairly mild. However, the orchids still benefit from the thermal mass of the house, to help keep them warm on a chilly night. They seem very happy with this system, as 85 percent of them are currently throwing new spikes.

Of course, I have a few plants that don't tolerate the cold in any respect; and a few that are not fans of temperatures over 30 C. So for them, I have used my windows and set up a system of seasonal rotation. This means that my miltoniopsis and masdevallias get summer holidays indoors; and the tropical phalaenopsis species get a winter vacation to the milder climes of my living room.

My indoor set-up consists of shelving next to a large window that receives indirect light. I supplement the light with LED lamps (the type used for marine aquariums with multi-spectrum). On the shelves, I use trays or pots with damp gravel and sphagnum moss to keep humidity high; and I mist-spray as required.





So far this indoor/outdoor rotation system seems to work very well; but it is in its infancy. I'm not overly experienced with these plants, so time will tell. At least I haven't killed anything yet!

All in all, I currently have approximately 100 orchids in a floor space of 2.56 square metres, outdoors on the balcony; and a further 30 plants in 0.21 square meter area indoors in my lounge room. Even better, I still have room to add to my collection!