Phalaenopsis Orchid Care

The Phalaenopsis or 'Moth Orchid' is the most common orchid due to its ease of production and the availability of blooming plants year-round. Phals are easily grown in the home and stay in bloom for a very long time. A mature phal will be in bloom much of the year with graceful inflorescences loaded with good-sized blooms. From pure whites to unusual spotted harlequins, Phalaenopsis are sure to please. Unlike many other orchids, Phalaenopsis can be repotted anytime, though it is usually best to do so when not in bloom.

The culture of Phalaenopsis involves windowsill light and consistent moisture. Phals do very well as houseplants and will grow and flower in a moderately bright windowsill. Each year a Phalaenopsis will grow one or two new leaves. Once the growth phase is complete, usually in the fall, a bloom spike will emerge from the stem beneath the second or third leaf from the top. Sometimes we have to help a Phalaenopsis that is grown in a consistently warm home to realize it is fall by allowing it to experience lower temperatures (60's) for several nights in order to set a bloom spike. Phalaenopsis bloom in the late winter through the spring.

In late June and July the Phalaenopsis in our collection finally lose their blooms, some will remain in bloom for a while longer. The ideal time to repot orchids is when they go out of bloom and Phalaenopsis is no exception. Once it has finished blooming the orchid will focus on growing new roots and leaves in preparation for new flower spikes.

Establishing good watering practices can be a bit tricky at first for a new orchid owner. Each growing environment is unique, a sun porch in Florida requires different watering than a windowsill in New York. Phalaenopsis like to stay generally moist but not sopping wet and must always be kept in a pot with good drainage.

Here are the basic care requirements for a Phalaenopsis orchid.

- A moderately bright windowsill or similar spot to grow in.
- Watering when it begins to dry out, usually every 7 to 10 days.
- An orchid food spike or fertilizing with a fertilizer made for orchids.
- Repotting when the bloom is finished with fresh orchid mix or orchid bark.
Do not be dismayed by the (often sudden) dropping of Phalaenopsis blooms as spring turns to summer. This is the time of year we expect Phalaenopsis to drop their blooms and begin their growth season. We expect them to spike again when they notice the chill of early fall and bloom in the winter or spring.

Since Phalaenopsis remain in bloom for a large percentage of the year it is best to seize the opportunity to repot them right after they finish blooming. Phalaenopsis, especially the younger ones, typically thrive on repotting. fresh orchid mix is essential for fresh new growth.

Growing a strong orchid that will re-bloom requires growing a strong root system. The leaves of an orchid may look nice but if it does not have a robust root system it will not readily re-bloom and thrive. Since Phalaenopsis are epiphytes (air plants) they would rather be hanging on to a tree in a jungle than be in a pot. When potted it is critical that the orchid roots be able to breathe. This makes the selection of a top quality orchid mix of the utmost importance. Don't be fooled by generic orchid mixes sold at hardware stores. When it comes to orchid mixes, quality and freshness really matter. Once you see for yourself the difference a fresh mix from the highest quality ingredients makes compared to store brands you won't ever want to go back to those inferior mixes again.

Many Phalaenopsis are sold potted in Sphagnum moss and often times the moss is very tightly packed around the roots to help the plants hold moisture as they are transported for sale. Once in our homes, however, the tightly packed moss often retains too much moisture. Seeing that the orchid is not drying out, the tendency is to repot it into a mix sold in the big box stores right next to the orchids. Unfortunately these mixes are often times made from fir bark and peat moss. Phalaenopsis, however, dislike moving into fir bark mix when they were used to sphagnum resulting in additional stress. The problem is not the fact that an orchid is potted in moss, the problem is how tightly the moss is packed for the orchid's new growing conditions. Moss is the potting media of choice for many of the world’s top orchid producers and it is an excellent choice for hobbyists as well.

**Cutting Spikes on a Phalaenopsis**

I am often asked about cutting back flower spikes as orchids go out of bloom. For most orchid genera the flower spike should be cut back after the bloom. This is usually indicated by the plant as the spike turns brown. For Phalaenopsis it can be a bit tricky to know what to do and to make matters more confusing there are differing schools of thought on the issue.

On most Phalaenopsis, the bloom spike will turn brown after the plant is finished bearing flowers on a spike. It may not turn brown all the way down, however. One school of thought says to cut the spike above a node on the stem and allow the plant to re-bloom again as a branch off the existing spike. The other school of thought says to always cut the flower spike off at the base when the blooms drop. Blooms take energy from the plant so cutting the spike entirely off allows the plant to gather its energy for an even more spectacular bloom in the future. Allowing the spike to branch results in more blooms sooner but takes energy from the plant resulting in often smaller blooms. In our collection we take the middle ground. For large plants with large root systems we will sometimes allow the plant to branch off an existing spike. For younger plants or those with less vigor we will cut the bloom stem at the base when the flowers drop.

It seems in orchid culture there are exceptions to every rule. Some Phalaenopsis should NOT have their bloom spikes cut. These Phals have in their parentage species such as violacia, ambonensis, cornu-cervi, etc. These Phals usually bear only a few blooms at the end of a spike and will bear blooms sequentially on the same spike for a very long time, seemingly forever. The primary reason to cut these spikes is if the plant becomes too unruly.
Here are some pictures to show what we have just discussed:

**Phalaenopsis Spike - To Be Cut**

This is an example of a Phalaenopsis spike dying back after blooming. This spike should be cut. We will choose to cut this spike off at the base. The orchid in the photo is a first bloom seedling that we have raised from flask. It is potted in the same pot with another of its siblings. As shown in the photo the spike has only turned brown halfway down. This plant is indicating that it would like to branch from the green node below the brown but it is too young to be expected to branch from the same spike. We will cut the spike at the base and repot.

**Node on a Phalaenopsis Spike**

Each spike on a Phalaenopsis will have at least a few nodes going up the spike prior to the blooms. Each of these nodes bears the potential to branch either during or after the initial bloom. If the decision is made to allow the orchid to branch on a spike, cut the spike off directly above a node.

**Phalaenopsis Spike - Do Not Cut**

This orchid is a violacea species that will bloom sequentially from the same flower spike. One distinguishing characteristic of this type of Phalaenopsis is that they stubbornly prefer to grow horizontally and bear horizontal spikes. This plant has sent off three separate spikes at different times and they will each bear one or two blooms at a time. The best way to know whether to cut the spike or not is to know the parentage of the orchid. Another way to know is to observe the plant. If the spike remains green, leave it alone.
Phalaenopsis Spike - Time to Cut?

This orchid has been in sequential bloom for a very long time. At this point the bloom spike is long and unruly. During the time that the longest spike has been blooming this plant has sent up two other spikes. We will choose to cut this spike in the spring to give the plant the summer growth cycle to focus on new leaves and hopefully another new spike. It's always possible that this spike will stop bearing flowers on its own and either die back naturally or bear a keiki.

New leaves on a Phalaenopsis

We are looking forward to new leaves from our Phalaenopsis in the summer. After repotting and a brief rest we will be increasing our fertilizing to give these orchids the strongest summer growth period that we can. Once the summer is over and the kids head back to school we need to make sure that our Phalaenopsis realize the fall is here and that it is time to set a bloom spike. For orchids grown in the home this can be a bit tricky as constant temperatures are often maintained. A good chill from a window left open a crack on several cool fall evenings helps Phals to set their spikes.

Is it a Spike? Is it a Root?

We hope to have most of our Phalaenopsis showing spikes by Thanksgiving. Spikes emerge from the same area of the plant as the roots and there are anxious moments awaiting a verdict of "is it a spike?". Spikes look like "mittens" or little hands and are not purely round like roots. Look for this characteristic shape.
Phalaenopsis Basics:

**Blooms**
Winter-Spring, can bloom year-round

**Water:**
Likes to be damp, not soggy… 7 to 10 days. Be sure to drain excess water so the roots don’t sit in it.

**Light:**
Low light

**Temperature:**
Warm growing, minimum temp of 55 degrees

**Fertilize:**
**FEED ME!** Weakly, weekly
Increase amount by 50% from May-September

**Growth Habit:**
**Monopodial,** grows 1-3 new leaves per year. Bloom spikes emerge from the base of the 2'nd leaf node from the top, usually in early fall.

**Look for:**
New leaves in the Summer, Spikes in the Fall, Blooms in the Winter and Spring

**Taxonomy:**
Genus Phalaenopsis
Tribe Vandeae

**Natural Cues:**
Phals are sensitive to the drop in temperature that comes with fall. If grown indoors the plant should be given 2 weeks of near minimal temperatures in the fall to initiate bloom spikes.