

The Green Scene

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Care of Orchids

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The orchid family (Orchidaceae) is one of the largest plant families on earth with more than 28,000 known species. Orchids can be found on every continent except Antarctica, but it's the tropical regions of the world that grow the most diverse number of species. They are noted for their uniquely shaped, colorful, and often fragrant flowers.

Most orchids are epiphytes growing on top of the other trees, shrubs, or rock outcroppings often holding on using aerial roots. They get water and nutrients from the air, rain, and any organic debris that may pile around them. Other orchid species, especially those grown in temperate climates, are terrestrial. They grow in the soil of grasslands and forests.

Tropical, epiphytic orchids make up the majority of orchids grown and collected as houseplants. Hundreds of species can be cultivated indoors, but a few are much easier to grow indoors and can be easily found at greenhouses and garden centers. The best orchids for home gardeners to grown include:

- Moth Orchid (*Phalaenopsis*)
- Dancing Lady Orchid (*Oncidium*)
- Cane Orchid (*Dendrobium*)
- Corsage Orchid (*Cattleya*)
- Slipper Orchid (*Papholpedilum*)

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Extension and Outreach

Yard and Garden: Diagnosing Houseplant Problems

By Aaron J. Steil

AMES, Iowa — Growing houseplants is a rewarding hobby that yields beautiful results. But when houseplants problems arise, it can be difficult to determine what to do to fix the issue. In this week's Yard and Garden column, Iowa State University Extension and Outreach horticulture specialists answer questions on how to address common issues seen on houseplants.

What causes leaves on my houseplant to turn yellow or brown and drop off?

Yellowing, browning and dropping of leaves is one of the most vague and difficult symptoms to deal with because it can be caused by a wide variety of issues. Many of the problems seen in houseplants are not caused by just one factor; they are the result of several factors coming together. It is important to investigate all potential causes and take corrective action to ensure the issue is fully resolved.

Improper environmental conditions are the leading issue that causes leaf drop. Be sure temperatures are not extreme. If plants were not protected from cold in transport or experience blasts of cold or warm air from doors, windows, or air ducts, leaves are likely to yellow and drop. Check watering practices, as over- and under-watering can lead to these symptoms. Plants that are under-fertilized will often develop yellow leaves. Low humidity will cause the browning and eventual drop of leaves. Light levels that are too high or too low, as well as a sudden change in light intensity, will cause leaf drop. Always change light intensity levels gradually when moving plants to new locations.

Why is my houseplant wilting?

Wilting is the result of roots not being able to provide adequate moisture to the leaves and stems. It can be caused by two completely opposite reasons, either under-watering or over-watering, which can make it difficult to diagnose and solve. First, check for dry soil conditions. If the root ball is dry too long or dries out very quickly, roots do not have access to water and plants wilt. Water more frequently and thoroughly, making sure the entire root ball is wetted. If the container is too small and plants are rootbound, repot in a larger container.

If soil conditions are too wet, especially over an extended period of time, roots begin to rot and die. With fewer roots, the stems and leaves do not have access to enough water, and they wilt. Always let the soil dry thoroughly between waterings. Check for water on a regular basis and only water when the soil is dry to the touch an inch or two down. Make sure the container has a drainage hole and that saucers and outer pots and leaves are not allowed to hold water. If the soil is old and broken down becoming more compacted, it will hold more water, leading to potential rot. If this is the case, repot in fresh, well-drained soil.

