

# Oncidiums

from Carol Allen, the Orchid Lady

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## Oncidium Culture

Astonishing, awesome, and outrageous Oncidiums! This group of hybrids, more correctly entitled *Oncidium Intergenerics* (Dancing Lady Orchids), includes some of the most incredibly diverse flowers. Encompassing nearly every color, hue, and shape, they are as easy to grow as 1, 2, 3!

### NUMBER ONE: Sunlight!

In the Mid-Atlantic States three to four hours of direct sun are needed for the best growth and bloom. A South-southeast facing window that receives a long period morning sun is perfect. Filtered (like through a sheer curtain) south or west will also work. You want to bathe the plant in very, very bright light for at least half of the day. If you have low-e glass, south or west is probably preferred. The light should be bright enough on a sunny day to make you squint.

### NUMBER TWO: Proper Watering

Make sure your orchid is in a pot with drain holes! Watering is a two-step technique. First you need to identify the type of potting medium and second you need to apply a sufficient quantity of water such that the potting medium is adequately moistened. The type of potting medium makes a tremendous difference in how often you water your orchid. Once a week no matter what is not correct!

Oncidiums are frequently produced in Hawaii and can be potted in lava rock. This material will be either black or dark maroon and have a rough surface. You will want to repot as soon as it is out of bloom into a material that is better suited to our Mid-Atlantic States. While it is in bloom, if it is in a 4" pot, water thoroughly and deeply about every four days.

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Sometimes Dancing Lady orchids are potted in a coarse bark material that looks something like mulch. Watering a 4" pot every 5 – 7 days will work in this medium. Unfortunately in this type of medium it is very difficult to tell when it is wet or it is dry. You will have to remember when you watered last and while the medium is great for growing in the greenhouse, it is not so great for growing in the home.

Occasionally oncidiums are purchased potted in a golden, mossy substance. This is a species of tropical sphagnum moss and when an orchid is properly potted, it is nearly a perfect growing environment. However watering is a bit tricky. You must allow the top half-inch (in a 4" - 5" diameter pot) to go crunchy dry and I mean really, really crunchy dry. The top of the moss will no longer be soft and in the typical home, about a week to ten days will have gone by. If there is any question about whether the moss is dry enough, wait another day before you water.

When you water you always want to water thoroughly and deeply. Take the potted orchid to the sink and allow a moderate stream of tepid water to run through the pot. Run the water around the entire surface of the medium. Continue to allow the water to run for a full minute by the clock. The pot will have gone from relatively light in weight to profoundly heavy. (Except in lava rock!) If in doubt, run more water into the potting medium. Allow to drain for a few minutes and then return it to the windowsill.

### NUMBER THREE: Repotting!

...as soon as it is out of bloom it needs to be repotted! When you buy your new orchid the potting medium will have already composted and degraded. Orchids complicate matters further by being very sensitive to salt build up in the medium. The salts come from fertilizers and our regular tap water. Salts prevent normal root growth and will burn existing roots. For these reasons, it is imperative to repot your new orchid as soon as it is out of bloom. Thereafter, an annual repotting will keep it growing and blooming year after year.

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## A Few Other Details....

In general, a little FERTILIZER goes a long way! Use an even numbered formula such as 7-7-7 or 10-10-10. Only fertilize when the plant is in active growth; when growing new leaves or growing a spike. During those times of growth, fertilize once per month. ...or as an alternative, apply a quarter strength dilution after every watering. Always apply the fertilizer solution after watering, never when the plant is dry.

A relative HUMIDITY of 50% - 60% is ideal. Good AIR MOVEMENT is essential if your humidity is extremely high. In the home this is less of a problem, but in the greenhouse, circulating fans should be used.

Oncidium's are fairly pest resistant, but sometimes scale insects can be a problem. With most PESTS the first line of defense is always simple removal. A cotton ball or light finger pressure and a stream of warm water can be used to wipe any insects and their debris off of the leaves. A child's paintbrush can be used to remove any pests or debris in folds of the leaves. Spray with a horticultural or neem oil to smother the insects and their eggs. The same technique can be used if spider mites become a problem. It is best to examine your plants on a regular basis as early detection and control is always more effective than trying to control a major infestation.

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