

Australasian Native Orchid Society Illawarra

Growing Australian Dendrobiums, Dockrillias and Other Epiphytic Orchids

Australian native orchids are among the most interesting and easy to grow. These fall into two loosely defined cultural groups. The first encompass the orchid species and hybrids that are indigenous from Tasmania to just north of the NSW/Qld border. These are called cool/temperate growers. The second group encompasses those species and hybrids from the sub-tropical and tropical areas of North Queensland and these are called hot growers.

These notes relate mainly to the orchids that are grown by the majority of native orchid growers in our region i.e. the cool/temperate species and hybrids. These can be successfully grown in a shade-house or even around the garden under or attached to trees whereas heated glass-houses are usually required for the hot growers.

Pots and Media

Most people prefer to grow Dendrobiums in black plastic pots. Special squat pots are available and are preferable to normal pots as they use less potting media and correspondingly have less chance of having zones of soggy mix at the bottom of the pots.

The most common medium used for native Dendrobiums is a mix of treated pine bark and pebbles, usually 50/50, of a size suitable for the size of the plant & the pot. Small for small plants & big for big plants. However, many growers add their own "secret ingredients". These can comprise charcoal, sphagnum moss, etc. Plants can also be grown in expanded clay as used in hydroponics or even in old wine corks! The important thing to remember is that it must be free draining so that the roots don't rot. It should also not break down too quickly, lasting for a minimum of 2 years to avoid having to repot every year.

Another way of growing orchids is to attach them to mounts. In fact, some orchids are not particularly suited to growing in pots. These are the ones that grow by way of rhizomes (or creeping stems) such as the Dockrillias and Bulbophyllums. Mounts can be made of long-lasting materials such as cork bark, seasoned hardwood (old fence palings, etc.) or well weathered tree fern fibre. The plants can be attached to the mount by way of nylon fishing line, old nylon stockings cut into strips or plastic coated twist ties.

Watering

More orchids are lost through over-watering than through under watering as the potting medium breaks down faster and causes the roots to rot. Bear in mind that Dendrobiums, Dockrillias and Bulbophyllums (and others) grow naturally on trees or rocks with their roots more or less exposed. When these are grown on mounts, over-watering is not a problem but when grown in pots, the roots are unable to dry out as quickly.

Naturally, heavier watering is required over Spring/Summer when the weather is warmer and the orchids are in active growth. Less water is required in Winter, do not water on wet, or very cloudy days when there is the chance of rain. In Winter, water in the morning so that the plants have all day to dry out before nightfall.

Fertilizing

Only fertilize in the growing season. There are many different fertilizers available, both organic and inorganic. If using any of the special orchid formulations, follow the instructions on the label. If using general fertilizers such as Aquasol, etc, use regularly at half the recommended strength.

Shade

Different species have different requirements but, generally, all can be grown in shade of between 50% & 75%. This can be in a shade house or, as mentioned earlier, under or on trees in the garden. The rock orchid, *Dendrobium speciosum*, can often be seen growing in rockeries in gardens in almost full sun. Whether grown in a shade house or in the garden, morning sun is more important than afternoon sun.

Those plants that like high light intensity can be hung near the roof of the shade house whilst those that prefer more shade can be hung under the benches.

It is preferable to grow plants with similar requirements together, this makes it easier to control watering, light, etc.

In the Garden

Many native orchids will grow quite happily in the garden. As mentioned, *Dendrobium speciosum* is often grown in rockeries. *Dendrobium kingianum* and *Dendrobium x delicatum* will also grow well in a similar position. Native orchids can also be grown on virtually any tree except eucalypts that shed their bark. Some of the best are lilly-pilly, paperbarks, ti-trees, bottlebrushes, casuarinas or even lemon trees. Simply tie the orchid to a branch with nylon stocking or twist tie until the roots are attached to the tree.

Need More Information?

Why not join our Society? We meet the 2nd Tuesday of each month in Legacy House, 96 Market Street, Wollongong starting at 7.00 p.m.

Other ANOS groups and associated native orchid societies are located throughout Australia & New Zealand. Contact the Secretary, ANOS Inc. PO Box 2165, Taren Point, NSW 2229.