

Wintering Orchids by Steve Waters

How you do this obviously depends on what you grow, the housing they are in and the extremes of weather that you expect. So we all are in a different starting position. The only thing we can be sure of is that Winter will surely come and watch out if you are not ready! Our aim is to maximize the available heat and light and protect our plants.

I always start on the outside of the orchid house and get out the secateurs or even the chainsaw to make sure that no shadows from trees are cast on the orchid house. Then, my next task is making alterations to my housing. If I didn't have a permanent roof, I would rig a temporary one for the Winter. Weeks of dull, overcast days, possible rain and of course the cold blast of westerly winds wreak havoc on tropical orchids. The next most important thing is to prevent those westerly winds from chilling your plants. I do this by adding clear fibreglass sheeting to 60% of the side walls, particularly the western and southern. On the remaining wall area I hang plastic "blinds" that can be let down for night and rolled up during the day. This at least allows some air flow. Hopefully, our housing will prevent the one thing tropical orchids hate more than being cold, and that is being cold and wet.

The second set of tasks is done within the orchid house and focusses on the basic needs for plant life. This involves maximizing the heat, light and air movement available and reducing the water and fertilizer applied.

General tips

- Reduce watering progressively as the temperature drops.
- Water in the mornings for quick drying.
- Water only on sunny days.
- Water after 8:00 when the water supply has warmed up.
- Include some sanitizing agent in your water.
- Misting can be an alternative to watering on some days.
- In a mixed collection, separate plants into those that are still growing from those that are dormant and need very little water.
- Hang some plants closer to the roof or to fibreglass sheeting for quicker drying. Give priority to those in bigger pots or those overdue for potting as the mix may have broken down and will dry out more slowly.
- Check that no plants are buried too deeply in the pot as eyes can easily be rotted out.
- Reduce fertilizer. Generally use a high potassium fertilizer. Consider some foliar rather than root feeding.
- Be prepared to use fungicides.
- Learn about the cultural requirement of your plants, especially species.
- Close up your orchid house tightly about 3:30 p.m. and only open it the next morning about 9:00. This allows some heat to build up.
- Think about artificial aids such as fans and heaters.
- Keep a watch out for pests as they don't migrate for the Winter. If plants are not in active growth, systemic insecticides may be less effective .
- Maximize the space between plants for optimum light and air movement.

This article refers to most tropical orchids but there are always exceptions to any rule. For example, Dendrobium soft cane types need no Winter protection and enjoy (actually require) the cold blast of Wintry winds to flower well. They can be grown outside the orchid house.

Hope this helps. Remember everyone's situation is different so tailor your Winter culture to your own circumstances.