

Beautiful orchids to grow in your garden

Jeff Hutchings

As owner of one of only a few nurseries in Europe that specialise in hardy perennial orchids, I have battled for several years to educate gardeners about the numerous species and hybrids which will grow happily in the garden in the same way as any other herbaceous perennials – orchids' exotic flowers hide the fact that many can withstand most of the weather the British climate throws at them. The last two winters have proved the point, with many plants coming through the weather quite successfully, though, as you'd expect, it has exposed the vulnerability of a few species in some northern areas of the country.

Here I'll outline which orchids can, with the minimum of fuss, be grown successfully in a garden, and give you some tips on how to grow them. Of course, it's difficult to be specific about the hardiness of some species as the climate in the south west is vastly different from, say, Scotland. In areas where there is a lot of winter rain and very low temperatures it may be sensible to grow the plants in pots and put them in a cold frame when they are in their dormant stage.

To understand how to grow terrestrial hardy orchids, it's important to appreciate the climatic and geographic conditions of their natural habitats: the species I suggest here range from Siberia to Japan to southern Europe. Unlike the majority of tropical orchids that are epiphytic, all garden orchids are terrestrial, growing in very poor substrates which lack nutrients. This is vitally important when deciding where to grow them: planting in rich soil or compost is the best way of killing newly planted orchids. (The exceptions are *Bletilla*, *Calanthe* and *Cypripedium*, which will respond to feeding. A high-potash fertilizer with additional trace elements will encourage growth and flower numbers. This doesn't mean that other genera will respond well; indeed, many will suffer and eventually die because of the resulting soft growth.)

Knowledge of the annual growth cycle of each genus, below, helps us to grow them well. As with

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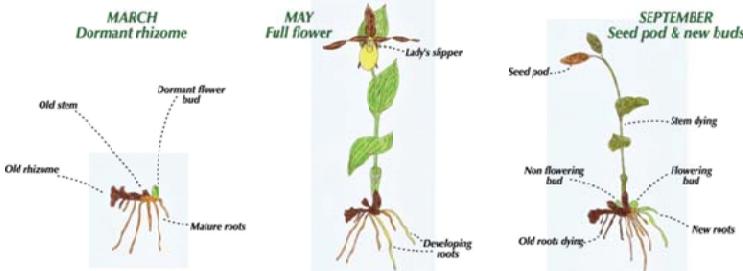
Fig. 1 *Dactylorhiza foliosa*

other perennials, orchids require more water in the growing period than they do when dormant: both under- and over-watering can stress, and ultimately kill, the plant.

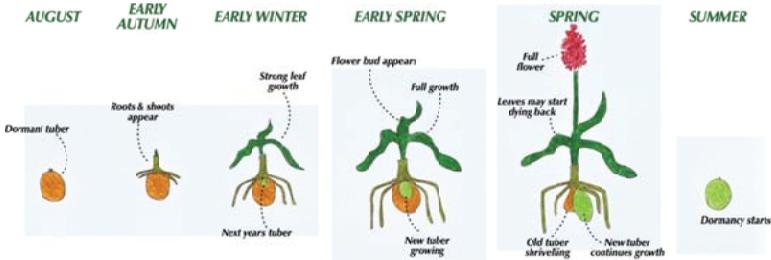
Annual cycle of the *Dactylorhiza*



Annual cycle of the *Cypripedium*



Annual cycle of *Anacamptis*/orchis group



The easiest genus to grow in garden soil is *Dactylorhiza* (commonly known as Marsh Orchids). There's little need to do anything to the soil before planting as they grow happily in many different conditions. They have a very interesting morphology, with a large food-storage tuber and a small growing tip which produces a single flower spike and, at the same time, at the top of the existing tuber, a completely new tuber(s) is formed, which will become the following year's plant(s). In this way the initial plant will become a group of individual plants growing close together after some years.



Fig. 2 *Bletilla striata*

lighter colour and makes a good border plant or is ideal in a large pot in full sun.

The native species tend to be shorter and have smaller flower heads. They are still useful in pond margins, grassland and rockeries but many have specific pH requirements. A choice of species provides flowering from mid-May to July, but most do not multiply



Fig. 3 *Bletilla striata* 'Soryu' will happily colonise an area.

Because the growing spike is the only growing point of the plant, if it is damaged it is highly unlikely the plant will grow again. If damage occurs early in the season the plant is lost, which is why it's important to avoid spring neck rot or leaf and stem rot.

Dactylorhiza hybridise very easily and some hybrids will germinate readily in a variety of conditions. This is why many of the plants offered in garden centres are hybrids, irrespective of the names used. Flower colour varies from near white with pink markings to dark purple, and the leaves are either plain green or have a variety of spotting. Undoubtedly, the best garden-worthy "species" is the one sold as *D. foliosa* (fig. 1) (originally from Madeira), which has a flower spike up to 75cm and is usually deep purple. In fact the true species, sold as *D. elata*, is a much

lighter colour and makes a good border plant or is ideal in a large pot in full sun. vegetatively as fast as *D. foliosa*.

The next orchid genus of interest to gardeners is the *Bletilla*, which comes from Japan and China. The most common, and regularly offered in garden centres, are the numerous variations of *B. striata* (fig. 2), with flowers that are near white to purple/pink. Yellow-flowered *B. ochracea* is a less hardy species. Some years ago a blue-flowered sport was found, now available under the name to *B. striata* 'Soryu' (fig. 3), 40 cm tall and flowering in June–July. Providing they're not grown in wet

conditions, the type of soil does not appear to be important. *Bletilla* multiply through the increase of pseudo-bulbs each year. The pseudo-bulb is first a food store, but after two or three years it becomes leathery and stops providing nutrients to the outer growing parts. The plants should then be lifted and these dead pseudo-bulbs removed. Unlike many other perennials, the best time to divide them is after flowering, in July, to enable the new buds and roots to develop during high summer and autumn. The overall hardiness of the genus in this country is questionable: because the pseudo-bulbs are vulnerable as they grow on the surface, border-grown plants should be given a heavy mulch in the autumn, and pot-grown plants are best moved into a frost-free environment,



Fig. 4 *Calanthe tricarinata*, the Monkey Orchid. Japanese enthusiasts have developed a number of hybrids but, sadly, few are exported. This is one of the few offered commercially.

Another Japanese genus is the *Calanthe*. There are over 200 species, but only a small number are both evergreen and fully hardy. In Japan they grow in wet, mountainous woodland areas and spread quite rapidly. Thus in this country they make an ideal flowering species to grow with ferns and hostas in damp shady areas. They have an underground pseudo-bulb which looks like the body of a large shrimp, which is how they get their Japanese name. In most species and hybrids the flower spike develops before the surrounding leaves open fully in late spring, but two species flower in August. *Calanthe* should be planted in a good, humus-rich, damp soil, and top-dressed with coarse, preferably composted, bark and leaf-mould every autumn. While technically evergreen, by springtime the majority of the leaves are badly damaged and should be trimmed off. The hardiest species that most looks like an exotic orchid is *C. tricarinata* (fig. 4).



Fig. 5 *Cyripedium calceolus*, from Swiss/Austrian stock, growing well in my garden.

Calanthe make good pot subjects planted in a 10 or 15L pot. Within a few years a large clump will form with flowers during the spring and large, deep-green leaves for the rest of the year.

The genus *Cyripedium* is better known by its common name of Slipper Orchid and the story of the British native *C. calceolus* (fig. 5) is orchid folklore. Because of collectors' activities since the sixteenth century, the species was declared extinct in 1936. However, a plant was later found growing in the Yorkshire Dales and since 1983



Fig. 6 *Cypripedium calceolus* at Gaits Barrow reserve.

C. calceolus has been the subject of a reintroduction programme, carried out by Kew with support from the Sainsbury Trust. There are now flowering colonies in several sites (fig. 6).

As a garden plant, *C. calceolus* is an excellent subject that likes cold, north-facing shade with limited summer sunshine, growing well in woodland or shrubby areas, or in a cold border. Depending on species or hybrid, flowering is from mid-April to late June, and height 30–60cm.

Only a limited number of the 65 species have been commercially cultivated, and of these even fewer grow happily in our climate. The problem is that the eastern species from Russia and China grow in areas where there are only two seasons: wet cool summers and cold but dry winters; this means they're not happy in our (relatively) mild wet winters.

However, growers have spent the past twenty years developing hybrids which exhibit the good qualities of the parents and have hybrid vigour. Many growers have crossed American species (for their vigour and ability to tolerate a wide range of conditions) with either a large-flowered or pink/red Chinese



Fig. 7 *Cypripedium* 'Sunny' in a UK garden.

species. It is these hybrids, such as *C.* ‘Sunny’ (fig. 7), that gardeners should grow. Websites provide a lot of information, enabling gardeners to choose the most suitable plants for their garden. Remember that it takes six to eight years from seed-sowing in a flask to a flowering plant, so if a cross is successful it will be another six years or more before other growers can start to produce it.

Besides cold and shade, cypripediums need well-drained, poor soils to grow in. The easiest way is to pot the rhizomes into a large (7.5L) pot using a compost containing pumice, grit and perlite with very low organic content, and then to bury the pot in the ground. This is much easier than trying to make areas of garden soil suitable. Cypripediums also make good subjects for growing in big pots, provided they are kept in the shade, using the same compost. Plant them in a plastic pot which can be put inside a decorative container – never use just a terracotta pot because it will dry out too quickly in the summer.

The genus *Epipactis* has some very useful subjects for wet areas of a garden or a wet meadow. *E. palustris* (fig. 8), the native Marsh Helleborine, grows in very wet, alkaline conditions. Its American cousin, *E. gigantea*, lives up to its name by spreading its rhizomes over a wide area when it’s happy.

The Latin names of orchids have often been changed. The group originally called *Orchis*, but now *Orchis*, *Anacamptis*, and *Ophrys*, are identified in part by their twin oval tubers in the growing season, but more by their growth cycle, which starts in the autumn rather than spring. They are known as ‘wintergreen’ orchids for this reason. The group includes a number of British natives which can be grown in a range of garden environments including lawns, rockeries, troughs and cold greenhouses. Many alpine enthusiasts grow some of the available species.

Unfortunately, most species do not multiply very quickly vegetatively, and are more enthusiasts’ plants than general garden plants. The majority require alkaline conditions



Fig. 8 *Epipactis palustris*



Fig. 9 *Ophrys apifera*



Fig. 10 *Gymnadenia conopsea*

to grow successfully. *Orchis mascula*, the Early Purple Orchid, is a good plant for a garden where tree or shrubby areas are underplanted with bulbs. *Ophrys apifera* (fig. 9), our native Bee Orchid, makes an interesting subject in a wild-flower area in a garden.

Two other native subjects that grow in similar situations but have tubers similar to, but smaller than, *Dactylorhiza* are the *Platanthera*, the Butterfly Orchids, and the highly scented *Gymnadenia*, or Fragrant Orchids (fig. 10). Both can be grown in shady situations along with bulbs.

The key to success is using plants of the right age. Gardeners need to know that it's nearly impossible to grow hardy orchids from seed without specialist equipment; also that it takes from four to eight years for individual species to reach flowering size and, because seedlings spend the first two years in a flask, planting young plants, recently out of a flask, is unlikely to be successful. So if you're

buying plants grown from seed, it's sensible to choose those within one or two years of flowering. This doesn't apply if the plants are divisions of mature specimens.

Finally, gardeners should be aware that there is a market in illegally obtained species, particularly specie cypripediums and European natives. They won't be offered by legitimate nurseries, but often appear on sites such as eBay. Always buy from suppliers who are responsible and who can offer sound advice.

And beware, growing orchids is addictive. 🐝

Jeff Hutchings is a nurseryman and lecturer. After 30 years at an agricultural college, in 1999 he set up Laneside Nursery, initially selling alpiners but since 2005 specialising in orchids, each year increasing the range of hardy orchids for sale. Learning through trial and error, as little was written on how to grow the different genera, he wrote *Growing Hardy Orchids* in a British Garden to help fill the void. Jeff exhibits regularly at shows and lectures across the UK.

See www.lanesidehardyorchids.com for more information on hardy orchids and their cultivation, plus heart-lifting birdsong!