

Growing Hardy Orchids, by John Morris

Easy Hardy Orchids?

Hardy Orchids have a reputation for being difficult to cultivate and best left to the specialist grower. Not so! Given a suitable compost or soil the following three can be grown easily in any greenhouse / alpine house, frame or garden. *Epipactis palustris*, *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and *Listera ovata* and there are many more in this category. These plants can be obtained quite readily from specialist nurserymen. "They must have been dug up from the wild" one frequently hears. Not so! Propagation in these genera has been going on for many years by the nurserymen and amateur growers who can supply without recourse to "digging up". The main problem is that with some species the propagation process is so slow that the prices charged can be high. When trying these delightful plants remember that European and North American hardy orchids thrive in relatively poor low-nutrient soil, don't be overprotective.

***Dactylorhiza fuchsii*:**

The Common Spotted Orchid is variable in height; from fifteen to twenty-five centimetres in pots and twenty-five to thirty-five centimetres in the open and has five to ten leaves per stem that are heavily spotted. Its tuber is hand shaped or palmate, hence *Dactylorhiza*. The flowers, some twenty to sixty per stem, can be white through to purple-pink, the petals marked with dark red or purple lines and spots. The flower spike forms a cylinder up the stem shaped to a point at the top and densely packed. In the wild this plant prefers open, fairly dry, chalky grassland and edges of woodland, but if grown in the garden prefers light shade. The soil in the garden and the compost if potted should consist of, if possible, chalky loam, sandy grit, leafmould and composted bark. Flowering June to early August.

***Epipactis palustris*:**

The Marsh Hellebore between twenty and sixty centimetres tall, in pots towards the lower figure, is the best species in this genus. The flower spike has up to twenty flowers loosely spaced down one side of the stem and rises from a system of shallow creeping rhizomes below ground. The outer segments of the flower are purplish brown and pointed, the inner, white turning pink at the base. Flowering period is July to September. In the wild this plant prefers moist, sometimes chalky meadows and dune slacks. In the garden it grows quite happily and increases yearly by buds forming on the spreading underground runners. If grown in pots, repot every two years and divide runners. Add leafmould and gritty limestone to the garden soil in a dampish area. Mixture for potting; in a large pot, John Innes No. 2, leafmould, limestone chippings, composted bark and grit. Top-dress with limestone chippings.

***Listera ovata*:**

The Common Twayblade has two large, mid-green, oval leaves placed opposite and about one third the distance up the stem. The slender stem reaches between twenty and sixty centimetres in height. The flowers are tiny, green, sometimes reddish-brown and twenty upwards of them grow close to the stem and are uniformly spaced. In the wild it can be found in hill pastures, moist woodlands and coastal sand dunes. Flowers May to August and

increases by root buds which grow from the base of the flowering stem. It grows equally well in chalky, neutral or acidic soils so, when planting in the garden or in a pot, peat can be added to the mixture of grit, leafmould, composted bark and good basic loam.

