

Some Easy to Grow Hardy Orchids Malcolm Brownsword

I grow lots of hardy orchid species in a cool greenhouse, but the only ones I grow outside at the moment are *Dactylorhiza majalis*, *D. praetermissa*, *D. fuchsii*, *Epipactis palustris*, *E. gigantea*, and *E. gigantea x veratrifolia*.

Most of us do not have a natural marshy area in our garden in which to plant moisture-loving orchids, so we must create conditions that will ensure that the roots are kept moist. The clay component of the soil in my garden is more suitable for making pottery than growing orchids, so the simplest way to provide good growing conditions on a small scale is probably the “buried bucket” technique shown to me by Bill Temple nearly 10 years ago.



Dactylorhiza praetermissa
grown using the “buried bucket”
technique in my garden.

Photo by Malcolm Brownsword

For *Dactylorhiza*, in late August when the foliage is about to start dying down, acquire a plant and twist the newly-formed tubers carefully. They should separate easily. You are likely to get two new large tubers, and possibly one or two small ones as well. Discard the dying current year’s growth.

For *Epipactis*, cut sections of root during the winter, ensuring that two or three new shoots are present on each root mass. They have roots that look remarkably like Couch Grass and spread at a similar rate. Most shoots will hopefully produce a flower spike. They are quite prolific and can become rampant weeds! A clump will at least double in area each year.

We are now ready to plant. First dig a hole to fully accommodate a large plastic bucket. Drill 1cm. diameter holes in the side of the

bucket, each about 10 cm. from the base. Then pour in gravel to a depth of approximately 12-15cm. Place the bucket in the hole so that the top is just below the soil surface. Next mix the components of the growing medium. I use roughly equal volumes of composted bark (“Mulch’n’Mix”), alpine grit and John Innes number 1 compost. This has been very satisfactory, but Perlite can be substituted for some of the grit. I don’t believe the species I grow are particularly fussy about composts, so use your own recipe.

Pour in sufficient growing medium to half-fill the bucket, and then add the tubers or rhizomes, spreading out the roots. Almost fill the bucket with the growing medium, finally topping up with gravel to the level of the soil surface. This will deter slugs and snails, which are quite partial to *Dactylorhizas*.



Note that the drainage holes are not in the base, but 10 cm above it. When it rains, or when you use your watering can, the bottom 10 cm. of the bucket get very wet and the excess water drains through the holes into the surrounding soil. The growing medium above the wet region should stay moist enough for the plants to thrive. The grit gives good drainage, so in wet weather the growing medium does not get stale. The composted bark helps hold moisture, and the John Innes Number 1 compost gives low levels of nutrients. You will need to water during dry spells in the summer, and re-pot (or rather re-bucket?) every two years.

Epipactis gigantea x veratrifolia grown using the "buried bucket" technique in my garden.

Photo by Malcolm Brownsword

Growing Moisture-loving Hardy Orchids in the Garden

