

Activity: Plant Care Goal: Cognitive Populations: All

TH Activity Plan – Epiphytic Orchid Watering

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Photo by Epic Gardening, Chicago Botanic Garden, Gardenia.net, Gardeners' World



Materials

Variety of epiphytic orchids in self-draining containers

Water source, containers that can hold both water & orchid

Printed/digital orchid care fact sheet

For virtual TH session, send instructions, materials list + zoom link ahead of session



ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION: Participants will practice watering epiphytic orchids, gaining experience with this type of air plant.

THERAPEUTIC GOALS:

Cognitive/Intellectual: Increase horticultural knowledge, practicing plant care techniques

Physical: Develop adaptive techniques for handling, watering plants & visually observing plant needs

Psychological/Emotional: Develop coping strategies for adverse situations which may include loss of plants

Sensory: Strengthen sense of touch including weight of orchid hydrated & dry

Social: Practice nurturing skills for people & plants; improve communication skills especially in virtual sessions

STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Gather materials & several types of epiphytic orchids.
2. Facilitator begins session by welcoming participants to the indoor or outdoor area where orchids are on display. Encouraging participants to observe the plants to foster interest & awe, the facilitator can share some interesting orchid facts.
3. The focus of this TH session is on watering epiphytic orchids. This may be part of a workshop or session, or may be the full activity, perhaps shorter in duration than other TH activities.
4. Facilitator shares information on epiphytic orchid roots, need for water, & best practices for watering these types of orchids. Materials & equipment are distributed.
5. Following a sequential method where facilitator describes & guides participants through the watering steps builds confidence & sense of inclusion. Steps: Determine if orchid needs to be watered. Check that orchid container has drainage holes. Fill bucket or container with room temperature water, placing orchid into the container. For orchids using bark growing medium, water should be at the lip so that bark doesn't spill out. Soak for about 10 minutes to saturate roots. Do not let plant sit in water longer than this. Feel the weight of the hydrated orchid, noting this for subsequent watering needs when it weighs less & needs to be watered.
6. Facilitator provides printed instructions for orchid care (watering or other), guides a discussion on orchids, & mentions orchid societies, orchid workshops, & orchid displays at botanical gardens.

APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS: Many people, in TH programs or not, have been given, and then cared for orchids—*Oncidium*, *Cattleya*, *Catasetum*, *Dendrobium*, *Phalaenopsis*, or *Vanda*. Not necessarily knowing their names or how to properly care for these fanciful flowers, it is essential that watering the plants is a basic skill. A watering task can be a good focus for TH programming across populations, in workshops, vocational programs, nurseries, classrooms or at botanical gardens. This TH activity is one that can be effectively delivered virtually if participants are able to have an epiphytic orchid for the session.

SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts. Most orchids are not considered poisonous although some species may cause mild irritation (i.e. Lady Slipper orchid).

NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS: Not all orchids are epiphytes (air plants that grow on trees) however the majority are (Horak, 2004). Orchids can also be terrestrial growing in soil, lithophytic growing on rocks, and aquatic growing in water. Epiphytic orchids have a prominent succulent stem(s) called *pseudobulbs* with roots that are efficient in quickly absorbing moisture and nutrients, this allowing the plant to manage during dry periods. The *velamen*, a thick air-filled layer surrounds the living central conductive filament of the orchid that acts like a sponge, absorbing water and nutrients. Understanding the structure and water needs of orchids is critical to managing its ability to survive and thrive. It is recommended epiphytic orchids are watered in the morning to deter fungal diseases, thoroughly soaking the plant roots (avoiding getting water on the flowers), and then letting them dry out before their next watering in 4-10 days (NYBG, 2025). Note that orchids grown in sphagnum moss will become hydrated more quickly than plants in bark mixtures. Soaking for both growing mediums works best. Tip – feel the weight of the watered orchid, then gauge the need for its next watering based on this weight.

This TH session can also include tasks and information for orchid fertilization, light and humidity requirements, root pruning, propagation, re-flowering, and repotting. Many books and [online resources](#) are available for orchid horticultural information.



Dendrobium



Vanda



Cattleya

REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

American Orchid Society. (2025). [Orchid care](#). AOS.org.

Hachadourian, M. (2019). *Orchid modern*.

Horak, D. (2004). [Orchids and how they grow](#). Brooklyn Botanic Garden.org.

NYBG LuEsther T. Mertz Livrary. (2025). [Orchid FAQs: Home](https://libguides.nybg.org). <https://libguides.nybg.org>

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2026.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2026.