**Growing Vanilla Orchids**

Unless you live in a region where tropical conditions exist year-round, you’ll want to have a controlled environment for your vanilla plant. For those of us living in Southern Florida, the base of a tree in an area where there is bright filtered shade in the afternoon might work. In all other regions, plant vanilla plants in small pots with an orchid potting mix.

## Your orchid needs a pole to climb on or some kind of support system for upward growth. The container and potting medium need adequate drainage, as orchids of this kind do not like to be waterlogged. Use a sanitized cutting implement and remove ⅓ of the bottom roots. Then, plant the rest of the plant and add your stake or trellis.

**Care**

Vanilla plants can be tricky, so it’s important to know what is required to care for and grow them. Stick to the guide, and you’ll be harvesting vanilla beans in a few years.

**Sun and Temperature**

A vanilla plant needs indirect sunlight in the morning and evening, and bright filtered shade in the afternoon. Too much direct bright light burns the plant and causes damage to the roots. Experts agree that the south side of a greenhouse shaded by a large tree is a great option. Because the USDA hardiness zones are limited (10 and 11 only) make sure you have a carefully monitored and managed space for vanilla beans to grow.

Vanilla plants prefer a warm environment and don’t do well in temperatures outside the 75 to 85-degree range. Outside this range, leaves will yellow and drop, and the vines won’t produce beans. It’s possible to grow vanilla beans in a shaded greenhouse or tent, with proper temperature control if needed.

**Water and Humidity**

This is probably the thing most people get wrong with members of the orchid family. Orchids want an evenly moist media around the roots, but they must not be waterlogged. They need high humidity and good air circulation. Let the top 2 to 3 inches dry out between regular watering. When the orchids begin to bloom, allow the entire plant to dry out for a few weeks between watering. Vanilla beans need at least 85 percent humidity. You can achieve this via grow tent controls, or by misting your orchid with a spray bottle. A humidity tray below your orchid might help in greenhouses that don’t achieve the required ambient humidity. Vanilla beans need controlled, consistent humidity all year round.

**Soil**

Vanilla beans need a mix of half orchid bark and half sphagnum peat moss. You could also use an entire pot of bark if you’d rather skip the moss or if it’s not available in your area. Use a mix and pot that is well-drained. Do not try to use a poorer quality potting mix, as this will kill your plant. Keep the pH between 6.6 and 7.5. Give your vine the right environment to grow in and you’ll harvest vanilla down the line.

**Fertilizing** *Water weakly weekly*

Vanilla beans appreciate a heavily diluted high-nitrogen fertilizer weekly (30-10-10 NPK) when it is actively growing. Only add fertilizer when the soil is moist, as adding at the same time the bark is dry will damage the roots. When your orchid is dormant, lightly fertilize with heavily diluted orchid fertilizer (20-20-20 NPK). Remember to only fertilize your vanilla when the soil is moist, in between waterings, and do so in the spring and summer months, especially. A time release fertilizer like 18-6-8 can also be added to the potting medium for nutrition over a longer period. Read the label of the product for quantities and length of nutritional release.

**Pollination**

As mentioned at the beginning of this piece, your vines must be hand-pollinated on the day they flower to produce beans. Use a chopstick or cotton swab to remove pollen from each flower in the morning hours. Then use the stick to add pollen to the female parts of the flower, which are hidden away under a flap. You’ll know if you were successful in just one day. The flower will wilt and stay on the vine. If it falls off, pollination did not occur. Within one-week, green pods begin to form.

**Harvesting**

The pods will begin to turn yellow and elongate during their development, eventually turning a light brown color. In 6 to 9 months the pods turn dark brown. When they’ve reached dark brown, it’s time to harvest the beans.