



St. Augustine Orchid Society

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Mites in Spring

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[Orchid Growing Tips](#)

Once again, I forgot to treat for mites in early spring and, once again, I lost leaves to these tiny beasts. Mites usually appear during times when the humidity is low, and affect mostly thin-leaved orchids such as Oncidiums. They first show up in my greenhouse on Phals and each year, I fail to recognize their symptoms until the plants start "screaming".

It is easy to miss mites on your orchids because they are tiny. I use a magnifying glass or high-powered reading glasses. Usually, I can only find one or two on a plant. Mites multiply when the greenhouse humidity is low in late winter or spring. On Phals, mites cause the lower leaves to drop and leaves appear desiccated. Often leaves develop pigments often mistaken for too much sun. Orchid leaves can also burn because mites steal so much water from the plant, that plants cannot open their stomata and cool themselves.

All winter long, hobbyists bring me plants that are not doing well and want to know why their orchid is not thriving. A large majority of these plants are being grown indoors and have had mites this year. The extra long winter in the Southeast combined with home heaters, which dry the air, often leads to mite problems for indoor growers.

The common mite on orchids is the red spider mite and occasionally the false, red spider mite. These are usually found on Oncidium leaves. Phals seem to have other mite species. They also do not seem to be abundant enough to cause much damage. However, when I treat for mites, Phals improve almost immediately whether the infestation was heavy or not. There are a number of miticides available to commercial growers that work well, but they are expensive and may not be available to hobbyists. A thorough spraying, top and bottom, of leaves with Sun Oil or similar light oil works well enough for me. Once the normal summer's humidity returns, mites cease to be a problem.

Most orchids have already begun their summer's growth, so now is the time to fertilize and increase watering frequency. If you use Nutricote, it is time to make your new application since last years application should be gone, if you used the 6 month release form. New t seedlings or orchids that have lost their root systems will benefit from foliar feeding with a dilute liquid fertilizer. There are many good fertilizers available, but be sure to use them at ¼ strength and always flush heavily with plain water once a month.

If you use R/O (reverse osmosis) water or rainwater you will also need to supplement your water with dolomite limestone either by adding it to your fertilizer water, which can be tricky, or applying it directly to the plant in granular form. All plants need calcium and magnesium and agricultural lime has both in just about the right proportion.

Light and heat will soon become an issue. Remember that the sun reaches its highest point next month (21st) so it will be easy to burn the leaves of your orchids if you are just getting them outside after the long, dark winter under lights. The darker your leaves the more heat they will absorb and the more quickly they will burn. Conversely, indoor growers may find their windowsills are no longer getting the direct light their orchids once enjoyed because the sun is almost overhead.