



St. Augustine Orchid Society

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The ABCs of Repotting

April 2001

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[Orchid Growing Tips](#)

Spring is the ideal time to repot most Orchids. Unfortunately, many new hobbyists are either too anxious to repot or neglect to repot when it is needed. As noted in last month's column, the condition of the media is important if a plant is to get adequate moisture and oxygen to its roots. For the novice, repotting is a major challenge. First there is the problem of what to use, where to get it and then finally exactly how is it done. All three of these subjects will be covered this month.

How do you know if the plant needs repotting? For Cattleyas the plant should either be growing out of the pot or have media that has become degraded. Orchids in clay pots usually grow out of the pot before the media breaks down. In plastic, however, the extra moisture retained by plastic pots usually accelerates the breakdown of bark and necessitates repotting every two years or so. Phalaenopsis in ProMix or other soilless mixture must be repotted at least once a year or even more frequently if you have over watered and damaged the roots. Paphs, unlike most Orchids, like to be repotted every six months, while Vandas in baskets or Orchids mounted on cork or wood never need repotting. Many novices buy mounted Orchids only to see them wither and die. If you cannot maintain adequate humidity for mounted Orchids you should try setting the Orchid, mount and all, into a clay pot large enough to hold them. Try this before taking the Orchid off their mounts and potting them. The clay pot will maintain some humidity around the plant even inside or under lights.

There are many different medias used in Orchid culture. Commercial Orchid nurseries are largely guided by cost and availability. The hobbyist, however, can use the one best suited for their growing conditions. But what is the best? If you are just beginning to grow Orchids this is a difficult question to answer. The best approach is to ask a couple of more experienced growers that grow under conditions similar to your own, what they use. They may not all give you the same answer, but it will limit your choices. Also look at your plants and if some are doing very well in a specific media try that type first. Remember that the pot should be included in your deliberations as this is part of the media. Some Orchids will adhere to the pots more than the media. Fortunately, many types of Orchid media are available in local garden stores. More experienced growers can also provide guidance as to where to find media.

In my greenhouse there are Phalaenopsis potted in ProMix, Fir Bark, and New Zealand Sphagnum, Cattleyas potted in a Fir Bark, Charcoal, Treefern Mix and in Osmunda fiber, Oncidiums in Lava Rock, mounted on cork, and in bark, and Vandas in baskets and in pots with Osmunda. What is best? They are all best for the individual plant and for their location in the greenhouse. Knowing what each plant requires is what makes repotting so difficult and separates the novice from the expert. The best advice is to look at what your plant is currently potted in and use that mix if the plant is growing well. Eventually, you may find another; better media, but that will take experience and knowledge of what different types of Orchids require.



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Always remember that most Orchids grow attached to trees in nature and the job of the Orchid grower is to make the plant believe that it is attached to the outside of the tree by supplying air to the roots alternating with enough moisture to allow the plant to grow.

Once you pick a media and decide your Orchid needs repotting you are ready to repot. Water the plant thoroughly before repotting. This softens roots and makes removal from the old pot easier. It also gives the Orchid a supply of water that will have to last until you water it again. Most "how to books" recommend that you wet the media before using it. **DO NOT FOLLOW THIS RECOMMENDATION.**

Begin by placing extra drainage in the bottom of the new pot. Some growers use Styrofoam peanuts, lava rock, or broken crockery. Then place the plant in the pot. If the plant is a Cattleya, Dendrobium, or Oncidium place the oldest bulbs against the side of the pot and new growths toward the center. This will allow maximum time for plant growth before you need to repot again. Carefully fill the pot with the new media and press down hard with your fingers. Do not bury the rhizome. It should be above the media. Pound, yes pound, the media down with a semi-pointed piece of broomstick and keep adding media until the roots are tight in the media. There should be a half to an inch between the top of the media and the top of the pot. You must convince the roots that they are attached to a tree or they will not grow without being damaged each time the rhizome moves when you water.

Phals, Vandas, and Paphs should go in the center of the pot. Gently shake the media around the roots being careful not to bury the base of the leaves in the media. Do not pack this media with a stick or press down hard with your fingers. Gentle tapping usually packs media tight enough for these Orchids. Vandas may need to be tied in place as they are usually potted in very coarse media or placed in baskets and pots with no media at all.

The admonition to use dry media is to prevent bacterial infection through damaged roots. Dry media allows the root to seal all of the damaged areas. The only exception is sphagnum moss. Sphagnum moss should be moistened, but not dripping. Bacteria infections are rare in this media because of the extreme acidity of the moss.

Repotting is not only important for the health of the Orchid, but for the education of the hobbyist as well. As you examine the degraded media and the old plant roots, you will begin to gain an understanding of what your watering regimen has done to the plant and the media and appreciate differences between media. Orchids are fairly tough plants and usually survive repotting even by amateurs. After a few years you will be able to use your experience to aid the next group of amateurs.