



St. Augustine Orchid Society

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Degraded Baskets

October 2003

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It was inevitable. Sooner or later the baskets that held my vandas and other genera were going to degrade to the point where they had to be replaced/ repotted. As repotting began it was surprising how much variation there was with respect to how long various plants had lasted in their respective baskets, but there were some general observations that are relevant.

First was the observation that many of those wonderful hardwood baskets that had been priced so low lasted only a few years despite looking so perfect when they were purchased. Some lasted less than three years. Then there were the handmade (by me) cypress baskets made more than 18 years ago from wood from an old tobacco barn that had finally begun to fall apart. Obviously, there is a great deal of variation in the quality of baskets. The ones that lasted less than three years also did not seem to promote the attachment of roots to baskets as did many of the old baskets. Many kinds of wood are toxic or release toxic materials and it may be that these mahogany-like woods were in fact inhibiting growth.

Many of the new baskets I get these days also seem to have termites or various types of wood boring insects in them when they arrive, evidenced by the sawdust like material under them after they have been stored. I have started soaking new baskets for a day or so after they arrive to drown any insects that may be in or on the wood. I am also hoping that the soaking will eliminate any toxic compounds that may be exuded from the wood itself.

It was also clear that baskets that contained various types of media broke down more quickly, especially those with chunks of *Osmunda*. Once tree fern chunks started to age they also contributed to the breakdown of the wood probably because they allowed the wood to stay wet longer. The big surprise was that *Sphagnum* did not seem to accelerate wood rotting despite the fact that it stayed wet longest. This is likely due to the extreme acidity of this product. In fact, the wood below balls of *Sphagnum* looked almost new. Large pieces of volcanic rock were only added a year or so ago to baskets, but showed no sign of accelerating the deterioration of baskets.

Some groups of orchids also seemed to be found more frequently in rapidly deteriorating baskets, especially bulbophyllums. They are watered twice every day and usually kept in an area that is more shaded along with a moisture-retaining medium. *Phalaenopsis* species and many primary hybrids, especially those with *Phal schilleriana* and *Phal gigantea* thrive in baskets and baskets containing these species also seemed to degrade more quickly.

Moisture retention seems to be the key element leading to rapid basket deterioration. New baskets with lots of termite holes or those made of types of wood that absorb moisture may be more vulnerable to accelerated rotting.

How does one repot an orchid that has been growing in a basket for many years without seriously setting the plant back? First, it depends on the condition of the plant. If roots attached to the basket have started to deteriorate then a set back may be inevitable. More likely though, there are plenty of live roots some attached to deteriorating parts of the basket and others to hard wood. Soak the basket with the plant for 20-30 minutes. Most attached roots will pull loose easily after they are soaked. Remove dead roots or those badly damaged



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using a sterile cutting tool. Some growers dip roots in a weak bactericide, but that is not necessary if the plant is to be mounted again. If the plant is being placed in a pot, dusting damaged roots with powdered cinnamon will usually be enough to prevent rots.

When remounting a plant remember that new roots will only attach if the plant is firmly in place. Wire stakes can be made that grip the side of the basket much like those used on clay pots. On large vandas, two stakes may be required to hold the stem vertical while new roots grow. It may also be necessary to hold old roots in place while old roots re-establish. Typically, the newest roots will branch and quickly adhere to the new basket if they are held firmly in place.

To attach a mature plant in a basket is not an easy task and requires a little experience as well as some trial and error learning. Fall is also not a good time to be remounting orchids. For now, identify plants that will require new baskets next year and begin the process of acquiring materials such as baskets, wire, etc you will need. Techniques for mounting orchids will be the subject of November's column.