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Repotting Cattleyas

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It is hard to think about repotting now when days are short, nights long, and it is very cold; but it is time. Unless you are lucky enough to live near an orchid supply house, it may take a month or so to assemble everything you need to repot your orchids when they are ready. Timing is everything when repotting, so a short primer on when to repot is in order.

Repotting Cattleyas is one of the greatest challenges for hobbyists. Often, newly repotted plants languish and never really grow well after they are repotted leading many to believe that they did not repot properly. For Cattleyas, timing is probably as important as the potting experience of the hobbyist.

Recall that each new growth on Cattleyas produces its own set of roots and repotting damages or destroys a large proportion of these roots. Each new growth will bloom and produce a new growth using the roots attached to each growth. The key is to not damage new roots that will provide the nutrients for growth and flowering.

Unfortunately, different Cattleya species grow roots at different times of the year. William Rogerson's recent article in the Orchid Digest (December 2004) provides an excellent approach to repotting Cattleyas. He divides most species and their hybrids into two categories, the "root before blooming" group and the "root after blooming" group. The general idea is to repot a Cattleya just before it grows new roots. For Cattleyas *labiata*, *trianaei*, *mossiae*, *schroederae*, and hybrids dominated by one or more of these fall-winter blooming species, repot when they begin to produce new growths in spring and summer. If you have only a few Cattleyas, note on the tag when they begin to grow new roots. If the new roots emerge while the new pseudobulb is growing then it belongs in the "root before blooming group". If the roots emerge from the new growth while it is in bloom or just after blooming then it belongs in the second group. Some species in the "root after blooming group" are Cattleyas *warszewiczii*, *lueddemanniana*, *warneri*, *dowiana*, *aurea*, and *gaskelliana*. In general, these are late spring or summer blooming species. Many yellow and summer blooming hybrids will also follow the same rooting pattern. Hybrids are often more forgiving than species, but still do better if potted at the correct time.

Many Cattleya species and their direct hybrids, e.g. *C dowiana* and *C bicolor* are reputed to be hard to grow, largely because of the time of repotting. *Cattleya bicolor* is usually in bloom when they start to grow new roots and should be repotted. In general, bifoliate species and hybrids (two leaves per growth) are less forgiving than unifoliate (1 leaf per bulb) when it comes to repotting at the wrong time.

Some repotting supplies may be easy to come by, while others must be shipped in. Shipping and packing costs can exceed the cost of materials for some products, such as clay orchid pots or bark. Many hobbyists band together to ship in quantity or even travel to the supply house. Be sure to call and reserve what you need, as demand often exceeds supply in spring. Don't forget rhizome clips, baskets, hangers, and other miscellaneous supplies that make repotting much easier.