



St. Augustine Orchid Society

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Repotting Overgrown Cattleyas

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@gmail.com

Some cattleyas have a linear growth habit, growing in a straight line from one edge of the pot to the other. These are easy to repot, you can wait until several bulbs grow out of the pot and cut the new growth away, or secure a pot next to the original pot so the cattleya will grow into the new mix. Other cattleyas break multiple leads and grow all around the pot, and tend to keep growing upwards on top of the older pseudobulbs. You can end up with two, three or four layers of rhizomes. These can grow into specimen plants with multitudes of flowers. Eventually, there will come a time they have to be repotted and you will have to disturb the roots. Repotting these overgrown cattleyas often require hammers, knives and brute force.



1. The leaf yellowing started about two months before it bloomed, so I knew this was the year it would have to be repotted



2. Two or three years ago it started growing out of its 8 inch pot, so it was just dropped into a second larger pot because the mix was still in good shape.

There was one overgrown cattleya in the greenhouse that started to show yellowing leaves in the late winter/early spring. Clearly this plant was signaling the older pseudobulbs and leaves were dying, either due to advancing age or degrading potting mix. The mix was several years old but the plant was still firmly established in the pot so it was allowed to go through its blooming cycle before surgery was scheduled. The first step was trying to get it out of the pot, or in this case, pots. Two or three years ago it had started growing out of the pot but the mix was still fresh so it was simply dropped into a second larger pot. Somehow we didn't have to break the pots to extricate the plant, but it did require knives to separate the roots from the pot and two people tugging on the pot and plant to remove the outer pot.

The repotting process is a great feedback loop. In this case, you could see how much the plants enjoyed growing in the space between two pots, no media required. This trick works particularly well with bifoliate cattleyas that resent having their roots disturbed. Once we got the plant out of the inner pot, the other thing that was obvious was how healthy the roots were despite being in the same mix for 5 years. The thick layer of Styrofoam chunks in the



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bottom third of the pot together with the coarse potting mix and shallow slotted orchid pots allow for great air flow around the roots.



3. The outer pot was removed, revealing a mass of happy, healthy roots growing in the air space between the two pots.



4. Outer pot is removed, now we are ready for major surgery. Look for a place to cut where you will be damaging only the older growths.

Once we got the plant out of the inner pot, the Styrofoam was removed and discarded. Using old steak knives, we cut through the oldest sections in the middle of the clump while protecting the newest growths until we had some manageable sections to clean up. You could see that the plant had grown around and up over itself into 3 or 4 layers. The leaves that were yellowing were attached to bulbs growing from the rhizome in the deepest part of the pot.



5. Remove the bulbs with yellowing leaves, turn the plant upside down and look for the lowermost rhizomes attached to the yellow leaves' bulbs.



6. Divide the plant into viable clumps with several leads, give the roots a haircut and some root stimulator.



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At this point, it was time to search for the oldest pseudobulbs with the yellowing leaves to cut them away from the plant. The plant was turned upside down and the potting mix was pulled away until the oldest rhizomes were visible. One by one, the rhizome was cut and the pseudobulb pulled away from the top of the plant. Then, the process was repeated until all the bulbs connected to the yellowing leaves were cut away from the plant. If there had been any fungal damage, sunburned leaves, or other ugly plant symptoms, these too would have been removed. All in all, about 20 bulbs were cut away from the plant.



7. One by one, these senescing leaves and bulbs were removed from the plant and discarded.



8. Four plants in 8 inch pots, all healthy leaves. Amazing how much better they look after repotting.

The final step was giving the roots a haircut and applying some root stimulator on the rhizome and roots. The Dip 'N Grow product works well for this at a 20:1 dilution rate. Mix up 1 tsp (about 5 ml) of the product in 100 ml of water and pour it into a small spray bottle for use that day. Do not mix up more than you can use in a day. If you have any extra after your potting chores are over, search around for a plant that seems to be struggling and pour the remainder into that pot.

It is always amazing how much better your plants look after they have been repotted. The big overgrown cattleyas take quite a bit of time and effort to get them situated in their new pots. Knowing that they will grow in that pot for two to four years makes it all worthwhile. Each year they remain in the pot, their root system strengthens and you'll get better and better blooms.