



St. Augustine Orchid Society

www.staugorchidsociety.org

The Transition to Winter

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@hotmail.com



1. Many of the orchids and tropicals winter in a heated hoophouse. The more cold tolerant orchids are squeezed in before a projected frost.

The shorter day length, less intense sunlight and cooler temperatures typical of fall cause changes to the growth rates of your orchids. Many orchids rest during the cool weather, so they enjoy being watered only a third to a half as frequently as during the growing season. Let the pots dry out an extra day or two between watering, checking the mix a few inches into the pot before watering to see if the mix is approaching dryness. The need for mineral nutrition is likewise reduced, and some growers discontinue fertilizing altogether during the winter months while others apply fertilizer at half the summer rate. Most orchids resent repotting during these periods of slower growth and will not quickly reestablish. Delay repotting until you notice active root growth unless there are extenuating circumstances such that the plant might not survive without an emergency repotting. This general approach to orchid care during the cooler months works for most of the more commonly grown orchids, like cattleyas, the oncidium intergenerics, bulbophyllums, many dendrobiums, phalaenopsis and vandas.

Some orchid varieties may not survive or bloom for you if you water and fertilize them the same way as you do the majority of your orchids. Catasetums and some dendrobiums, lycastes, calanthes and habenarias transition into a period of dormancy during which they require no or almost no water to sustain themselves. These types of orchids hail from regions with a decided wet and dry season. They endure extended periods of drought by shedding their leaves, surviving on the energy stored in their pseudobulbs and corms until the rainy season returns.

Many new catasetum growers wonder how to care for their plants during the fall transition to winter. A simple guide is to reduce watering frequency and fertilizing starting with the fall equinox. The obvious sign of impending dormancy is leaf yellowing and dropping. If leaves are still green by Thanksgiving, restrict all fertilizer, and if they are still green by Christmas, discontinue all watering to force dormancy. Once all the leaves have dropped, move the plants to a place where they will not receive any water. If you intend to repot the plant, make it a habit to look at it every week during dormancy.

The ideal time to repot a Catasetum is the moment you see the beginning of new growth at the base of the plant. The location of the new growth tells you how to orient the plant in the pot so it will have the maximum amount of space to grow. If you delay repotting until the growth gets larger, you risk knocking off the tender new growth or breaking the new roots



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during the repotting process. After repotting, resist the urge to water until the new growth is about 5 inches tall. The plant will be fine living on its energy reserves, you will not have to worry about water getting into the whorl of new growth and rotting it, and the back bulbs will plump up when you resume watering.

Many of us grow dendrobiums, a diverse genus of orchids with varying cultural needs. Some can be grown with your cattleyas while others require a coolish, dryish winter. It is helpful to segregate or use colored tags to identify the ones requiring different winter treatment. As a gross simplification, the spring blooming dendrobiums often enjoy a winter rest while the summer and fall bloomers grow well next to your cattleyas. For the ones that enjoy a deep winter rest, eliminate fertilizer after the fall equinox and cut back watering after Thanksgiving to perhaps twice a month.

The website contains links to specific cultural recommendations for a variety of orchids. The [Seasonal Tips](#) page addresses watering during each season and the fall preparations for winter. The [Culture by Genus](#) page addresses the specific needs of a variety of orchids. Feel free to ask any questions you may have. Simply send [emails](#) with descriptive pictures to info@staugorchidsociety.org.