



St. Augustine Orchid Society

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Does My Orchid Have to Be Repotted?

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@hotmail.com

We get more questions about repotting than any other subject. Some folks never repot their orchids because they are intimidated by the whole process, so their potting mix ultimately rots causing their roots to rot and their orchids are well on their way to orchid heaven. Other folks repot their orchids several times a year because they say their plants are just not blooming for them. Their plants never get a chance to get established, so they too will soon find their way to orchid heaven. There are really only three reasons I can think of to repot an orchid.



Repot. This *Encyclia radiata* will be happier in an 8 inch bulb pot.

Repot All New Additions Before Adding to Your Collection. I almost always repot an orchid I bring home, immediately if it is not in bloom. If I buy a blooming orchid, I enjoy the flower and don't touch the roots until the plant is bloomed out. Then I pot the orchid in my mix of choice for that kind of orchid. All my cattleyas and dendrobiums are in a coarse, freely draining, largely inorganic mix so they can all be watered every second or third day during the growing season. My phalaenopsis are all in a soilless peat mix so they can all be watered every week or two when they approach dryness.

When you bring orchids home, they can be growing in wildly different potting mixes, from pure sphagnum moss, pure bark, pure clay pebbles or gravel, or mixes containing these materials. Each of these mixes retains water at a different rate. If you bring orchids home and just water them all on your normal watering schedule, you'll find the ones potted in



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sphagnum moss stay too wet, the ones potted in gravel/clay pebble mixes stay too dry and the ones potted in a bark/coco mix may be just right.

Some growers also set you up for failure when they grow their seedlings in sphagnum moss and then pot them up to a larger pot by packing bark around the sphagnum core. These plants are impossible to water correctly because if you water when the bark approaches dryness, the roots in the sphagnum moss will be smothered from overwatering and if you water when the moss approaches dryness, the roots in the bark will wither from dehydration.

If you repot your orchids into your mix of choice when they first enter your growing area, you will know when you repotted them and how long they should grow well in that mix. You can water all your similar type orchids in the same mix at the same time without water logging or dehydrating them. It makes taking care of your orchids much simpler.



Repot. This cattleya looks very unhappy and is wobbly in the pot. It needs fresh mix.

Potting Mix is Degraded. Many people use organic matter in their potting mixes. It retains moisture, helps buffer pH and holds nutrients for later uptake by the plant. Of course, being organic, it will degrade over time and degrade is a nicer term than rot. When the potting mix rots, the roots that are growing in the potting mix will likewise rot because the potting mix smothers the roots.

Different organic materials degrade at different rates. The generally available 'premium' sphagnum moss tends to have a life of between 6 and 12 months. The much more



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expensive sphagnum mosses like the AAA to AAAAA grade long fiber New Zealand sphagnum moss will last for 2 to maybe 5 years for the highest quality moss. Coco husk is widely used and has a useful life span of 1 to 2 years in the pot. The quality of bark varies wildly and I use bark hesitantly as a result. The highly touted Orchiata bark is reported to be long lasting and we'll be testing this claim over the next couple of years. Tree fern fiber is also variable. I stopped buying the medium grade because it had so much fine material in it, now I only buy the coarse grade. I have gotten bad batches of tree fern where snow mold appeared in mixes barely 2 years old, though good quality tree fern should have a life of 3 to 4 years. The highly desirable redwood bark is no longer available commercially. Regardless of the quality of the organic matter, it will ultimately rot and it is best to repot your orchids before the mix rots.

The easiest way to test whether your potting mix is past its prime is to try to lift the plant up by its leaves. A well established plant growing in a still fresh mix can be picked up by the vegetation. If it is wobbly in the pot, stick your finger an inch or two deep inside the pot. If it feels soft and dirt-like, odds are the mix is rotting. If you catch it early enough and repot before there is too much root loss, perhaps your plant will not suffer. Many times though, I discover the degraded mix because my plant starts to look unhappy. Trust your instincts, if your plant doesn't look happy, if it is wobbly in the pot, you've got your excuse. Knock it out of the pot and put it into some fresh mix.



Orchid Unstable from Growing Out of Its Pot.

The longer you can grow your orchid without disturbing the roots, otherwise known as repotting, the happier your plant will be. If it is a monopodial orchid like a phalaenopsis, it may be growing well out of the pot with lots of aerial roots and not many roots anchoring the plant in place. It then becomes top heavy and a candidate for repotting. For a sympodial orchid like a cattleya, it seems like it always blooms better when there is a bulb or two or three out of the pot. Eventually there will be four or five bulbs out of the pot and your plant becomes unstable and unwieldy in the pot. Once your plant is physically unmanageable for you, repot it so it will be able to grow and bloom for you for another two or three years without touching its roots.

Don't Repot. This epicattleya may have lots of aerial roots but it can be picked up by the pseudobulbs with no wobble. It has six flower spikes this year, two more than last year.



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Don't repot unless you have a reason to repot. Each time you disturb your plant's roots, it will go through transplant shock and take some period of time to recover. You can minimize the transplant shock by repotting just before your plant starts throwing off new roots. You can also help your plant recover from transplant shock by adding root stimulating hormones when repotting. Some people spray seaweed, Superthrive or other root stimulants on the bareroot plant or add these supplements to their water/fertilizer mix for the next month or so. I add a protective drench of the fungicide Banrot plus seaweed after repotting to minimize the inevitable damage that occurs during the repotting process.



Repot. This cattleya has new leads growing horizontally outside the pot and should be reoriented vertically in a new pot.