



St. Augustine Orchid Society

www.staugorchidsociety.org

Orchid Triage

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@hotmail.com



The one thing no orchid grower has enough of is bench space. Your available bench space determines how closely you your plants are packed together. You know how important it is to have enough room around each plant for free air movement, but inevitably you start crowding your plants. You go to an orchid show and find one, or two or three orchids that you must bring home.

1. Empty bench space, an orchid grower's dream. Set up a triage area in your growing area, where you stage plants rather than grow them and set a time limit on how long plants are allowed to remain there.

This year I started doing the unthinkable, maintaining an orchid triage area, one area of the growing area that is normally an empty bench. The triage bench area is a dedicated staging area. This bench space is not an infirmary or orchid isolation area. It is a place that orchids sit for a short period of time where they are highly visible forcing you to take action.



2. You can stage your new plants in the triage area before you move them into the growing area. This gives you a chance to treat for pests and diseases and repot after they have finished blooming.



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During the Orchid Buying Season. New plants coming into the greenhouse first pass through the triage area before they are treated, repotted, incorporated into the growing area. Many advocate putting plants into isolation for several months to make sure any latent pest or disease problem is discovered before the plants go into the general population. As an alternative to isolation, why not just assume all new plants are carriers and treat them with drenches of a systemic pesticide and preventative fungicide? Unless the orchid source is a known and trusted orchid grower, all new orchids are repotted when brought into the growing area, or once they have bloomed out if bought in flower. This gives you a chance to see the condition of the ever-important roots. You can put the orchid in your mix of choice for that particular type so you know how best to water it, you know how fresh the mix is and how long it should last in the pot. Newly acquired plants sit on the triage bench until they have been treated and repotted, and only then are they moved into their new home in the growing area for them to live long and prosper.



3. Move your most severely overgrown plants to the triage area to give you some room to reorganize the rest of the plants on your bench.

During the Repotting Season. In the spring, when you get ready to begin the annual repotting marathon, first inspect your benches and pull those plants that are severely overgrown and move them over to triage. This will free up some bench space and you can start reorganizing plants of a given type. Identify all those cattleyas that do not require



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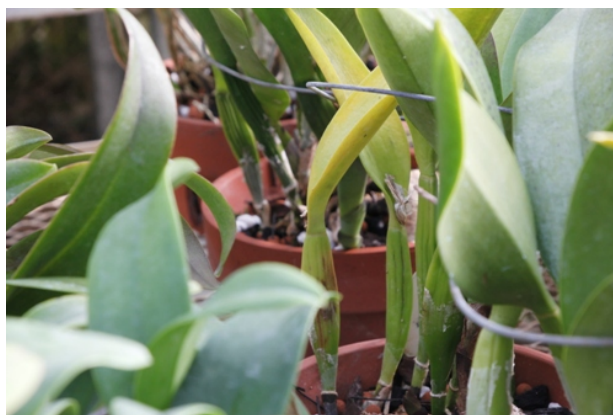
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repotting this year and group them together. Group the budded and flowering cattleyas together and enjoy the fruits of your labor. As they bloom out, move them into triage for repotting. Group your overgrown bifoliate cattleyas together so you can watch for new root growth. Once you see the soon to emerge roots swelling at the base of the pseudobulb, move them to triage for repotting. This way you can prioritize your repotting, moving plants to and from triage into your growing areas. When you are finished, you may find that you even have extra space for the seedlings you wanted to move up in pot size, particularly if you give away your extra divisions to friends or put them on the raffle table at your club.



4. As you find plants that require some attention, move them over to triage to force you to make those sometimes difficult decisions. See that plant in the center of the photo with the yellowing leaves?



5. Look a little closer. See the brownish discoloration moving upward from the base of the oldest pseudobulbs? Move the plant to triage for evaluation. It turned out to be brown rot from Rhizoctonia.

When You Discover Plants that Require Attention. When you are watering, really look at your plants rather than thinking about what you have to do later in the day. When you see a problem, put down the hose and carry the plant to your triage area. You may notice all kinds of potential issues while watering. There is that plant with the chlorotic spots on the leaf and when you turn the leaf over you see those devilish scale. You might see some general leaf yellowing and when you feel the potting mix, you notice that the organic matter is degraded and the plant is wobbly so you know it is time to repot. Anytime you see a plant that does not look right, move it to triage. Do not think you will remember which plant it was when you are done watering so you can go back to take care of it. Stop watering, move it to triage and then continue watering. Once your watering duties are complete, you will be forced to deal with that plant just by virtue of the fact that it is sitting in triage where there should be no plants.

Culling. Reclaiming bench space is an important part of managing your orchid collection. You want the most vigorously growing, healthy and floriferous orchids you can possibly have. Those orchids that you spend so much time watering and repotting should reward you with blooms that you thoroughly enjoy. There comes a time in the lives of all orchid growers when you must decide which orchids are worthy of your attentions. Fred Clarke of Sunset Valley Orchids was the first to teach me the fine art of culling. His advice was to



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walk through your growing area at dusk when the light is starting to fade and take a critical look at each of your plants.



6. This plant is taking up a lot of space, and there isn't a single sheath indicating that it has bloomed.



7. Though it has bloomed, this plant just looks unhealthy. You have to learn when to hold them and when to fold them.

Not Enough Blooms. Look for plants that take up a lot of bench space without having evidence of bearing lots of flowers. If you cannot find spent flower blooms on plant in a largish pot, you are not being sufficiently rewarded for your efforts. Either move it to a location where it will get more light and bloom better, or give it to someone who has a different shade green thumb.

Poor Growth Habit. Sometimes you have plants that just do not look happy and do not grow vigorously. You may check the plant tag and find that even though you repotted that plant 2 years ago, it has only put out one or two new growths for you. Assuming the potting mix is still fresh, you may have a plant that is simply a genetic weakling or perhaps it is suffering from a disease. No matter, you are not running a hospital for sick orchids. Discard the plant and replace it with a plant that will grow and bloom well for you.

Flower Does Not Meet Expectations. Sometimes when a seedling grows up and blooms for you the first time, you may decide the flower is okay but it does not really float your boat. Some people mark that type of plant with a special colored tag so it can be brought to the raffle table for someone who will enjoy it more than they do.

One weekend Alan Koch of Gold Country Orchids was staying with us between orchid talks. I asked him if he would critique the plants in my greenhouse and tell me which ones he thought were not worthy of the bench space. My Sainted Mother warned that you should never ask a question you do not really want to hear the answer to, so be prepared for some brutal truths if you ask a professional orchid grower how he would cull your collection. We walked up and down the aisles and Alan pointed to this and that orchid that should be given the boot, mostly because they were just not vigorous growers. Those poorly growing plants are now long gone and forgotten but the healthy plants remaining on the benches give me much pleasure even before their blooms open.



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Having a dedicated triage area will help you manage your orchid collection and your bench space. It gives you a staging area for new plants, for plants that have overgrown their pots and need new homes and plants whose fate you must decide, and quickly because that staging area should normally be empty. Set a time limit, no plant is allowed to sit in the triage area for more than 2 weeks. Having plants that require your attention in a dedicated area will force you to make those difficult decisions you would not have to make if you could just hide your sick plants amongst your other orchids. Learning to cull unhealthy plants from your growing area will leave you with a little extra bench space, not to mention a collection of healthier and happier plants that bloom more often and better than those soon to be forgotten weak sisters.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to those professional orchid growers who share their knowledge about growing the best orchids as well as how to identify and cull plants that will never perform up to your expectations.