

Topping Vandas

Does your favourite vanda look like a dwarf palm tree ...a long, bare trunk, a cluster of leaves at the top and a mess of roots at the bottom? Or is it so oversize that it would take a low-loader to transport it to the next show? Never fear! Help is near! That help starts with 'topping', a procedure designed either to start the process of getting rid of the 'palm-tree effect' or to reduce the plant to a manageable size. In the case of the 'palm-tree' effect, the plant is almost guaranteed to be suffering the effects of Thai disease. As explained in a previous newsletter, Thai disease is caused when a fungus called *Guignardia* infects the older (lower) leaves, produces dark, elongate lesions and results in the progressive loss of leaves from the base of the plant upwards. Infected plants are unhealthy, unsightly and do not flower to their full potential. The process of 'topping' is only the first step towards resolving these issues.

'Topping' means what it says....it literally means cutting the top off the plant. If we do that, will the plant survive? That depends on how we deal with each section of the plant. Generally speaking (and this is particularly so for strap-leaved types), there will not be any roots on the top section and, if the plant has Thai disease, no leaves on the bottom section. Let's assume that this is the case. If we are to maximize the chances of both sections surviving we therefore need to treat the top in a way that encourages roots to develop and treat the bottom in a way that encourages leaves to develop. The following system has proven to be very effective in solving both these problems:-

- (1). Using sterile secateurs, completely sever the stem about 3-4" below the lowest uninfected leaf (in the case of the 'palm-tree' effect) or at the required height (for oversize plants). In the latter case, cut away the leaves on the bottom 3-4" so as to leave a bare stem.
- (2). Treat all cut surfaces with a broad-spectrum fungicide paste (eg Mancozeb) or tree-wound dressing. This process helps to protect each section against infection with devastating rhizome-rot fungi such as *Fusarium*, *Pythium* or *Rhizoctonia*.
- (3). Wrap the bare top section in moist, long-strand sphagnum moss that has been lightly dusted with root-stimulating hormone powder (eg Take Root or Rootex) on the side that will wrap against the stem. Alternatively, the powder can be applied to the bare stem. Either way, treat the top as you would if you were taking a hardwood cutting from your favourite garden plant.
- (4). Push the sphagnum-wrapped stem into about a 3" diameter tube pot to which a suitable hanger is attached. A tube about 4-5" deep is suitable depending on the length of bare stem. The sphagnum should be packed fairly tightly into the tube so that it is in close contact with all of the stem in the tube.
- (5). Cover the surface of the sphagnum with medium-sized diatomite (or similar medium) to prevent the sphagnum becoming covered in algal growth. Support the plant by tying it to the pot hanger.
- (6). Hang the potted plant in a cool, airy, protected position in about 30-40% filtered sun.
- (7). Water sufficiently regularly to keep the sphagnum moist but not waterlogged. It is advantageous to apply foliar fertilizer on a weekly basis.

Roots can be expected to develop over the next couple of months. It is then time to shift the plant into about 50% filtered sun and to apply some 8-9mth slow-release fertilizer to the surface of the medium. The fully-rooted plant will be ready for transfer to your favourite medium in about 12 months. At re-potting, remove excess sphagnum but leave some around any roots that have developed in it. This will assist with their survival. The best time for 'topping' is from late September to February. This allows time for sufficient root development to enable the plant to withstand the effects of winter. Success is unlikely if the plant is 'topped' when dormant.

It should be remembered that unless the original cause of the 'palm-tree' effect (ie Thai disease) is controlled, the newly resurrected plant will once again return to the original condition. Briefly, Thai disease can be controlled with regular applications of suitable fungicide. Triforine (rose spray) is readily available to hobby growers, has low mammalian toxicity and when used regularly will provide adequate control of Thai disease. Once the disease is under control, several of the contact fungicides (eg Mancozeb, Bravo) will, when used correctly, maintain adequate control and prevent reinfection of newly developing leaves..

What happens to the bare bottom section depends mainly on the vigour of the plant before 'topping' occurred. If the plant was in a good, healthy condition (as is the usual state with oversize plants), dormant buds along the stem can be expected to develop into keikis. The application of keiki paste to some of the dormant eyes will aid in this process. Any keikis can be removed once they develop a vigorous root system. However, if the original plant has been severely affected by Thai disease, the bare bottom section may not have enough energy to produce keikis or if they do begin to grow, may be too weak to survive for long enough to develop roots. If this is the case, the wheelie bin is the best option.

Terete and semi-terete vandas respond well to 'topping'. These types often have roots almost to the top of the plant which can then be removed and potted without the need for hormone treatment. However, if roots are absent, use of the above procedures produces the same excellent results as they do with the strap-leaved types.

Friendii.