



## Selecting a Pot for Your Orchid

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@hotmail.com

There are so many decisions an orchid grower must make when the annual repotting marathon begins. You may choose to grow your orchids au naturale on a mount with no potting mix around the roots. You may find that you do not have the time to water your mounted orchids frequently enough so you choose to house your orchids in a pot with your orchid media of choice. Or you may choose the in between route and place your orchids in a basket with or without potting mix so the roots will be exposed to lots of air.

**Selecting the Type of Pots for Your Orchids.** If you decide to grow in pots, there are many choices to make when selecting a container for your orchid.



The first step is deciding what works best for you, your growing conditions and your orchids. Do you want to grow your orchids on a mount? in a pot? in a basket?

*Plastic or Clay Pots?* Plastic pots are cheap and they tend to retain more water. Plastic deteriorates rapidly in the sun due to exposure to the ultraviolet light (UV) unless UV inhibitors have been added to the plastic. Clay pots breathe and they are heavier so more stable in the wind. Plastic pots may keep roots warmer in cool climates while clay pots may keep roots cooler in warm climates. Many orchid growers prefer clay pots over plastic,



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but I often pot divisions in both plastic and clay pots and many times those in plastic pots end up having more blooms, from which I infer that I'm not watering the orchids in clay pots enough during the growing season. I think it's a matter of personal choice, clay pots are perhaps more aesthetically appealing, but plastic pots work well.



Clay pots breathe, are more stable outdoors and may keep roots cooler in warm climates.



Plastic pots are cheap, retain more moisture and may keep roots warmer in cool climates

*Clear or Opaque Plastic Pots?* There must be a reason that so many phalaenopsis are sold in clear plastic pots. One of the functions of orchid roots is to photosynthesize and if roots are exposed to sunlight, they can increase the plant's energy yield by maybe 10%. Clear pots also allow you to assess the health of your plant's roots, determine if the potting mix is ready to be watered and perhaps allow the plant to ramp up its growth rate earlier in spring. One negative is the algae, weeds and ferns that are encouraged to grow in clear pots.



Clear pots allow you to observe your potting mix and roots as well as allow roots to photosynthesize while in the pot.



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Many orchids prefer the shallower bulb or azalea pots to the taller standard sized pots.

*Do Clay Pots Have to be Orchid Pots?* Clay orchid pots used to have large slats on the side to improve drainage and allow more aeration around the roots. The pots you find today have three additional small holes for drainage but are these pseudo orchid pots worth twice the price of the non-orchid pots? The old fashioned deep slatted orchid pots are great for orchids if you can find them as are the shallow bulb pots with multiple large holes in the pot sidewalls. If you can't find good orchid pots, you'll find that you can simulate the conditions in non-orchid

pots by using a porous inorganic potting medium like lava rock or by placing a net pot or adding Styrofoam peanuts at the bottom of your pot to increase aeration around the roots.

*Standard, Azalea or Bulb Pot?* The shape of the pot is a very important consideration. The three basic pot shapes are the standard pot, the azalea pot and the bulb pot. The standard pot is taller than it is wide, the azalea pot is about as tall as it is wide and the bulb pot is much wider than it is tall. For most orchids, the azalea or bulb pot is preferable, although you can cheat with a standard pot by placing Styrofoam peanuts or the like at the bottom of the pot to simulate the conditions found in shallower pots. Some orchids like paphiopedilums and cymbidiums prefer an ultra tall pot, perhaps one that is two or three times taller than it is wide.

*Decorative or Glazed Pots?* Decorative glazed pots can be used for your orchids though the glazed pots do not breathe and it is possible you will damage the pot when you try to remove the orchid sometime down the road. It may be preferable to pot your orchids in a utilitarian pot and drop it inside the decorative pot for presentation. Be careful with decorative pots without drainage holes so as not to let the roots stand in water.

**Selecting the Proper Sized Pot.** Like many other plants, orchids tend to like being somewhat underpotted. There are two basic rules to use when you are selecting a pot for an orchid:

*Root Mass.* Root mass is much more important than the amount of foliage in determining the size of the pot to choose. Don't have preconceived notions of what pot is to be used for a given orchid based on how the plant looks sitting in the old pot. Take the orchid out of



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its old pot, clean off the old potting medium and dead or decaying roots, and consider whether you're going to give the roots a general haircut. Then select a pot that will accommodate the roots without them being overly cramped and twisted and without there being an excess ratio of potting mix to roots.

*Allow for Two Years Growth.* The general rule of thumb when repotting orchids is to use a pot that will accommodate at least 2 years of growth before the orchid needs to be transferred into another container. For a sympodial orchid, this means you'll have to consider how closely the canes or pseudobulbs grow together. As a rule, if you put the oldest part of the plant against the edge of the pot, the youngest part of the plant should be in about the middle of the pot with another half of the pot to grow into.

**Potting Considerations for Different Types of Orchids.** We can apply these general rules to the specific potting issues for common genera you may grow.



Phal in 4 inch pot

*Phalaenopsis.* About 95% of all phalaenopsis will be repotted into either a 4 or 6 inch azalea pot, you will almost never use a pot larger than 6 inches for a phalaenopsis. The choice of clay vs. plastic, or clear vs. opaque plastic is one of personal preference. More important is assessing the root mass of the phalaenopsis and choosing your pot to comfortably accommodate the trimmed roots. Don't be afraid to move a phal that was in a 6 inch pot down to a 4 inch pot if the root mass is small. If the root mass is too large for a 4 inch pot but too small for a 6 inch pot, use the 6 inch pot and compensate with another inch or so of Styrofoam peanuts.

*Cattleya Alliance.* Cattleya pots will vary all over the board in both the type, size and shape of pots. Cattleyas with closely spaced pseudobulbs like those with *nodosa* or *bowringiana* in the genetic background will enjoy being more tightly packed in the pot. Cattleyas with more sprawling rhizomes like those with *walkeriana* or *digbyana* in the genetic background will require larger pots. You'll decide whether to use a bulb pot, azalea pot or standard pot based on the root mass left once you have cut off the old growths and trimmed the roots. With cattleyas, the most important things to remember are:

- ★ A cattleya will only bloom on new growth so you retain old growths for only two reasons, either for the food and water reserves retained in the old pseudobulbs or for the hope that a new lead will develop from a blind eye on an older pseudobulb,
- ★ You need a minimum of 3 and preferably 5 pseudobulbs for a cattleya to have sufficient reserves to undergo repotting without a long period of transplant shock,



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- ★ Be brutal in removing the older growths because the new growths will be more attractive, healthier and be able to grow longer in the pot than if you have wasted that space on the older, damaged and sometimes ugly older pseudobulbs that will never bloom.



This happy dendrobium has 9 flower spikes.



It seems very happy in its 4 inch home.

*Dendrobiums.* Always use a pot that appears to be a little too small for a dendrobium. If you look at how closely the canes grow together and assume your plant will stay in that same pot for 2 or 3 years, you can appreciate how it will thrive in that almost too small pot. You will generally use azalea or bulb pots and a fairly inorganic mix because their roots don't like to be disturbed.

*Oncidium Alliance.* Oncidiums are not too particular about their potting mix or type pot. After you have trimmed up the plant and given its roots a haircut, select a pot size suitable for the remaining root mass.

*Paphiopedilums.* Paphiopedilums tend to like tall and slender pots. They grow fine in plastic pots and they seem to thrive in clay pots as well. You'll select your pot size based



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on root mass once you've cleaned up your plant. Don't be afraid to go down in pot size if the roots were not vigorously growing in the old pot.

*Cymbidiums.* Cymbidiums like any pot that is well drained and has more depth than width. The roots tend to go straight down in a lot of the species and shallow pots slow down growth. When selecting a pot for a cymbidiums with more than one bulb, choose one which will allow for two years growth, or leave about two inches in clearance around the plant. One pot that works very well for cymbidiums is the Rootmaker Gallon (see [www.rootmaker.com](http://www.rootmaker.com)). This pot was designed for tree seedlings but is an ideal container for cymbidiums.

Selecting the proper pot to house your orchid for the next two or three years is just as important as the potting mix you use. Once you've got your plant cleaned up and ready to repot, choose a pot based on the plant's root mass and ability to fill up the pot over the next two years. Your orchids will always bloom best when they're a bulb or two out of the pot, which tells you something if you are listening!