



**St. Augustine Orchid Society**

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## **Spring Migration**

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@gmail.com

Punxsutawney Phil did not see his shadow this year, so we hoped for an early spring. If you have ever brought out your plants too early thinking spring has sprung, only to find there is one more cold front on the way, you know you should first channel your spring energy into preparing your growing area.

**Preparations.** There are some chores you can get out of the way while you are debating whether or not it is too early to move your plants out from their winter home. It is not as much fun as playing with your plants, but it will pay dividends in the long run to have a clean and pathogen free growing area. Remove all the weeds in your growing area. Rake away leaves, particularly those dropped orchid leaves from last year with the evil dotting on the undersides that are disease spores just getting ready to infect your new leaves. Spread a herbicide containing Diuron (Karmex and others), to prevent weeds from sprouting. If you have benches, sterilize them before moving plants out. You can use Physan or pool algacide to disinfect, or go full metal jacket and spray with pool chlorine. If the weather forecast still looks good, you can think about your next dance moves.



1. The spring blooming Callista and Dendrobium section Dendrobiums spent the entire winter out in the shade structure with no supplemental heat or protection from winter rain, and bloomed profusely after our mild winter.



2. The Coelogynes overwintered in an unheated hoophouse, protected from cool winter winds and watered with an automated spray system. They bloomed beautifully in their wire baskets.

**Tough Guys.** We all have those tough guys, the nobile and seminobile dendrobiums that have incredible spring blooms and enjoy a coolish, dryish winter rest to produce them. You may or may not water them during the winter, though once or twice a month watering may mimic the dew they receive naturally. Cymbidiums can live outdoors during most of our winters and require protection only from hard frosts. Harry McElroy, the Cymbidium Man, grows them in an unheated shade house. My Coelogynes, that Marv Ragan has recently identified as Unchained Melody and flaccida, spent the winter in an unheated hoophouse and bloomed incredibly in their wire baskets.

**Which Plants First?** It's not quite as simple as last plants in, first plants out. The last ones you brought into the protected area in the fall are the ones that are the most cold tolerant, so logically they are the first ones to move out since they are the most likely to withstand a



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late season cold spell. The exception would be your winter dormant orchids that are not yet ready for Mother Nature to water them lest they develop rots.

Check the forecast for the next month to check whether the nighttime lows are projected to be above 50F, realizing the uncertainty in such a forecast and assuming temperatures may really drop down into the 40s.

***Stanhopea Relatives.*** The Stanhopeas and Gongoras are moved from their winter homes first because many of these can tolerate cool nights. Most weathered the close winter quarters fairly well, but without great air movement, they are prone to fungal leaf spotting and Anthracnose on the leaf tips. Each plant is inspected as it is moved out and infected leaves are removed to prevent the spores from spreading. In the past, I have cut away just the leaf tips but this leaves a big open wound and it seemed like the remaining part of the leaf showed signs of infection a month later, so now the whole leaf is removed and discarded. No repotting was necessary because in the late summer/early fall the tired sphagnum moss was jetted away and replaced with fresh moss. The *Stanhopea grandiflora* was in bloom and the *Stanhopea nigroviolacea* has four early season buds emerging from the bottom of the basket.



3. The Gongoras and Stanhopeas were the first plants brought out to the shade house this spring. Fungal leaf blighting had to be removed before the plants were hung in their summer home.



4. The Stanhopeas started blooming early this year. They are grown in wire baskets with a fairly thin layer of sphagnum moss and get buoyant air movement, protected only by shade cloth.

***Zygopetalum Relatives.*** The Zygos love these cool nights so let them enjoy them while they can! Put them in a night bright spot for now, but you will have to provide them with more shade as the season progresses to protect them from overheating. This is a good time to repot them. You can consider using the double potting technique where you pot them in clay in either a ProMix or sphagnum based mix and then wrap the outside of the pot in some sphagnum moss and drop it into a larger pot. This can help keep the roots a little cooler in the heat of the summer.

***Paphiopedilums.*** Many of the paphs thrive with cooler nights that can drop into the 40's. As you move the plants out, check to see whether they need repotting. Try picking up the plant by the vegetation rather than the pot and see if it is wobbly in the pot. If it is wobbly, the roots





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would probably benefit from being moved into a fresh potting mix. Courtney Hackney has great success with growing in lava rock, but I have been unable to duplicate his regimen. I use a blend recommended by Jim Krull of Krull Smith, consisting of medium bark, sponge rock, charcoal, clay pebbles and maybe 5% ProMix to increase water retention.

Once you have some degree of certainty that temperatures will remain above 50F, you can move most of the rest of your plants out, the cattleyas, Angraecoids, bulbophyllums, etc. As with all your plants, inspect each plant as you move it to its summer home. Check for signs of pests, particularly scale, mealybugs and mites. Also check leaves for evidence of fungi, including the spores that are often present on leaf undersides. You can spot treat isolated problems. If you find widespread issues, you may have to rethink your winter care options to eliminate the conditions causing the problem.

**Dendrobiums.** The dendrobiums are a very diverse group. Your nobile and seminobile (Dendrobium section) dendrobiums, often called the soft canes, the callista dendrobiums with the spring blooming flowers that look like grape clusters, and the Aussie dendrobiums probably spent most of the winter outdoors enjoying the cooler weather. Your other dendrobiums can be moved out now, except for the phalaenopsis type dendrobiums, which have long flower sprays emerging from the top of their hard canes. Wait until nighttime lows are going to be reliably above 60F so you don't risk leaf drop in these warmth loving dendrobiums.



5. The Cattleya seedlings love growing outdoors, drying out rapidly in the low humidity spring air. They will be moved under cover when the rainy season starts, to avoid rots.



6. The warm growing vandas summer in a shade house with a misting system set on a timer. The big two toned vandas are less tolerant of cool weather than some of the other vandas.

**Vandas.** Vandas too have a wide range of cold sensitivity. The small plants with star shaped flowers that used to be called *Neofinetia falcata* are very cold tolerant, as are the blue flowered *Vanda coerulea* and the fragrant *Vanda tessellata*. The large flowered two toned vandas with *Vanda sanderiana* are the least cold tolerant, and these should be protected until nighttime temperatures won't drop below 60F.

**Phalaenopsis.** Conventional wisdom recommends most phalaenopsis should be kept warm, particularly when in bud and bloom so these should be protected when nighttime lows are



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below 60F. Of course, we have all seen Walter Muller's phals that winter in a shade house with supplemental heat only during the coldest nights. Unless you can duplicate Walter's growing conditions, keep your blooming orchids protected until nights are reliably in the 60's. You might also consider keeping them under an overhang or roofed structure to prevent rainwater from accumulating in the crown of the plant.



7. Catasetums are repotted from December through March, just as the new growths form. The repotted ones are on the left and the ones awaiting repotting are on the right, all are kept dry.



8. Only when the new growths are about 5 inches tall and the leaves unfurled are they moved out into the shade house where they are watered every other day when we are without rain. .

Catasetums. Then there are the winter dormant orchids that endure droughty conditions in their natural habitat by avoiding it, dropping their leaves and going into a deep slumber, like some lycastes, habenarias and catasetum relatives. These may well be able to tolerate cooler conditions if your winter growing area has a roof. If the plants are rained on before the roots have elongated and the leaves unfurled, the new growths may perish as a result of crown rot. Catasetum repotting starts in December and continues through March, after which the plants are kept dry. Only when the roots have grown down to the bottom of the pot and the leaves are 5 inches tall or so and open are they moved out to the shade house to happily soak up all the summer sun and rain.

The spring migration should not be a slam bam move from winter to summer homes. Look at each plant as you move it. Make an assessment of how well or poorly it did and what you might change next year. The Stanhopeas did particularly well, so perhaps we have found their happy place. The Bulbophyllums, well perhaps not so much. Growing them under the vandas has subjected them to too many rots so we are emulating Linda Stewart's approach. This year we will be growing them out in the shade house with more air movement and less continuous leaf wetness. We also want to learn more about how Walter Muller grows his incredible Phalaenopsis, in wooden baskets with almost no potting mix. Who says you can't teach an old dog new tricks?