



## St. Augustine Orchid Society

[www.staugorchidsociety.org](http://www.staugorchidsociety.org)

### Shipping Orchids

September 2003

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[Orchid Growing Tips](#)

Christmas for orchid hobbyists comes whenever a package arrives with "live orchids" on the package. Large commercial nurseries have, by necessity, learned how to get plants to you in just about the same condition as when they left the nursery. Some small orchid businesses and many hobbyists are not as adept at sending plants as one might like. If you have reached the point where you are exchanging orchids with other hobbyists or selling them over the internet, it has already become clear that shipping orchid plants is not as easy as it might seem.

With just a few exceptions, it is best if orchids are on the dry side before shipping. That does not mean that they should be desiccated. If an orchid has reached the point where it would be watered the next day if left in your greenhouse, then it is ready to be shipped. Not only do you not want to pay for the extra weight of water in the pot, but also excess water invites both fungal and bacterial infection. Dry orchids also seem to withstand both excess heat and cold better. Bare-root divisions of plants should be thoroughly dried, as roots damaged during repotting are very prone to bacteria infection when confined in a box. Even Phalaenopsis, shipped bare root, quickly put out new roots and within a month are not different from those that had not been shipped.

The key to successful shipping is in packing. If a plant is larger than the pot where new growth (e.g. in cattleyas) or leaves (in phals) extend beyond the pot, care must be taken to avoid serious damage. Clay or plastic pots can be placed in a larger plastic pot with moss or newspaper in between. The goal is to keep the plant from moving during shipping. Shredded paper, moss, and many other types of material are often placed around new growths, the base of the plant, or anywhere there is sensitive tissues. Tape or rubber bands are used to hold this material in place so that the medium does not fall out of pots. Bare root divisions should be placed into plastic pots and surrounded by shredded paper so that the plant is firmly in the pot. Special care must be taken to avoid crushing bulbs and new growth. Finally lay old newsprint out and roll the pot and plant into a large cylinder. Fold the top and bottom over and tape shut. When ready, plants look like a stack of firewood. For tall plants it is a good idea to place a bamboo stake as long as the plant to keep the plant from bending. Find a box that is 2-4 inches longer, wider, and deeper than the plants to be shipped. Layer newspaper in the bottom and sides. This prevents cold and hot air from quickly entering the package during transport. Next add a layer of insulating material such as plastic peanuts or crushed paper. Layer plants like firewood with enough insulation between to prevent each plant from moving and crushing other plants. Clay pots require more packing in between because of the weight. When the package is within two inches of the top, fill to the top with your insulating material and gently shake the package to encourage the packing material to fill any unoccupied space. Add additional material so that the package is slightly overfilled. Add one more layer of flat newspaper and squeeze the box tight. The package should bulge slightly and nothing should shake inside. If it does, repack. Tape in all directions, including the edges. That ensures that the edge does not get caught in machinery and accidentally opened.



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Orchids in flasks may be difficult to ship as the flasks get shaken and seedlings damaged. Most shippers remove plants from flasks to ship. Stem props and soft seedlings must also receive special care, as they are vulnerable to conditions, especially desiccation, that would not harm a mature plant. This is one of the few cases where plants are shipped in plastic bags. The less shipping time, the better and sensitive stages should be shipped by two-day delivery. Older plants can be shipped three-day delivery. However, the longer orchids are in transit, the greater the chance of damage. This is especially true in winter and summer.

There are many different ways to ship live plant material, but usually plants arrive via FedEx, the Postal Service, or UPS. Just about everyone that ships orchids has a preferred shipping service based on past experience or location of either the shipper or recipient. Each of these carriers also varies with respect to price, delivery time, package size, reliability, etc.

Many people prefer the U.S. Postal Service's standard Priority Mail service. This method usually gets your orchids there in 3-4 days. However, there is no guarantee and a plant that does not arrive within that time cannot be traced unless you pay for the extra service. The advantage is that this is the least expensive method short of sending it regular Parcel Post that can take a week or more. There is also a Priority two-day delivery for those seedlings that need to arrive quickly. It is much more expensive. FedEx and UPS have a variety of services most of which can be tracked, but they are typically more expensive for the same weight. For a little more, a signature can also be obtained to verify delivery.

Despite many years of opening packages it is still a thrill to unpack a box of orchids. It can also be very disappointing to find new arrivals badly damaged because they were not packaged correctly. If you are sending orchids remember how it feels to be on the other end. Let the shipper know the condition of your orchids when they arrive so that they can change their packing.