



St. Augustine Orchid Society

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Growing Orchids in Baskets

November 2003

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The decision to place an orchid in a basket should not be made just because there was a wellgrown orchid similar to yours on the show table. Basket culture requires cultural conditions typically found in a greenhouse or outside, i.e. relatively high humidity and lots of air movement. Vandas and many orchids that grow well in baskets can and should be grown in pots if you cannot water a basket frequently or if low humidity causes an orchid in a basket to dry too fast. Many novice growers successfully grow orchids in baskets outside during the warm, humid summers in the Southeast, but then torture the same plant indoors during cooler months. If this happens to you, consider culture in clay pots with very coarse bark, charcoal, or lava rock as the medium. Orchids grown this way can handle the heavy downpours outside in summer, but also tolerate winter inside by a bright window or under lights.

If you have decided to grow your orchid in a basket, remember the same rules you apply to other orchids when they are repotted. The big difference is that you will not be able to pack media around the roots in a pot to hold the plant firmly in place until new roots grow and reattach your orchid to its surroundings.

Vandas and other large-root orchids are a little easier to grow in baskets than those with fine roots. Begin by soaking the roots and medium for 10-15 minutes in water or until the roots become soft and pliable so that they can be easily manipulated and removed from the pot or basket if this is necessary. A small vanda in a plastic mesh basket can simply be tied, basket and all, in the center of the new basket. If the vanda is tall and falls over use a wire holder to position it vertically until new roots attach.

Wire holders can be fashioned in many ways. Typically they are custom made using #10 or #12 galvanized wire. Bend the wire into an L-shape with one side 8-10 inches long and the other side as long as the outside diameter of the basket. The 8- 10" side will attach vertically to the main stem of the plant with a couple of pieces of green tie wire; the same material used to tie up flower spikes. Attach the other side of the wire L to the side of the basket. Some growers drill a hole vertically in the basket and attach the wire after bending it 90 degrees, while others bend it back and forth so that it attaches to the wood as the wire spike holders attach to pots. Try bending a few pieces of wire until you find a design that works.

For larger vandas, place the plant where you would like it to be in the new basket and loosely tie the main stem. It will likely be moved later after the wet vanda roots have been carefully threaded around and through the basket. You may need to wet the basket and roots while you work if they begin to dry out. The stem and leaves may settle during this process and can be retied. Some members of the vandaceous group have very thick roots that may resist this technique because they will not be flexible enough. Do not break them trying to get them to bend to your will. A bamboo stake, cut the width of the basket, can be used to hold roots in place by threading it horizontally through the side of the basket at a level just above the root mass. A little pressing will allow the stake to slide between the slats on the opposite side of the basket and firmly hold roots in place. A large plant may require two pieces of bamboo, one on each side of the main stem. It may also be necessary to put



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some Sphagnum or Osmunda fiber under the stake to hold the plant firmly in place and prevent damage to roots from the stake.

Finally, retie the vertical wire stakes to the stem. The plant stem and most of the roots in the basket should be firmly in place when you are done. The process is relatively easy for an 18" tall vanda, but far more difficult if the plant is 3 feet tall. For very tall vandas it may be necessary to use the wire hangers that hold the basket to help hold the plant vertical. Always use a hanging wire longer than the plant is tall. Tie wire attached to the 4 basket wires can be used to circle the main plant stem and hold it in place. Once mounted, avoid moving the basket any more than necessary until new roots have attached to the new basket.

Also available are basket bottoms (no sides) on which plants that like to hang down are mounted. The basket is hung vertically attaching hanging wires to just one side so that the orchid hangs vertically in a more natural position. Water thus runs out of the crown of phals and other species, which tend to rot if water sits in the crown overnight. To establish phals on these mounts they must be attached tightly so that they will establish quickly. The slats of the basket bottom should be horizontal not vertical for best success. Keep the plant under lower light and give it more moisture until new roots appear. Then it can be treated just as your other mounted orchids. Fall is not a good time to be moving orchids into baskets because most warm growing orchids have reduced growth during cooler months. Now, however, is a good time to plan for next spring and begin the process of accumulating the materials you will need next year. It takes a good summer's growth for vandas and most orchids to establish in baskets.