



Does Your Orchid Need to be Repotted?

May 2013

by Dr. Courtney Hackney, hackneau@comcast.net

May is one of the busiest months for orchid hobbyists. There is still time to repot, fertilize and attend to orchid pests.

“Should I repot this orchid?”, is a common question. Repotting is most critical and often hard for new hobbyists because it takes a while to learn how to do it properly and it’s hard to determine if the orchid should be repotted. The tendency is to want to repot, especially when there are roots going everywhere and a growth is at the edge of the pot. Orchids hate to be repotted, so repotting should only be done when absolutely necessary. Just because an orchid is coming out of the pot is not a reason to repot. Some types of orchids, e.g. dendrobiums prefer to be pot bound and go downhill for a year or two when given plenty of space in a new pot.



If you try to push a finger down into your orchid in a bark mix, is it difficult or does the medium yield easily? If it is relatively easy, the medium has degraded and you need to repot. If it is somewhere in between there may be a solution beyond repotting or not repotting. Hold the pot upside down being careful to hold the orchid itself in case the roots



Does Your Orchid Need to be Repotted?

May 2013

by Dr. Courtney Hackney, hackneau@comcast.net

are not firmly attached to the pot. Use a jet of water and direct it at the top of the medium. Sometimes most of the degraded medium will flow from the pot leaving a mass of roots with just a few pieces of hard medium. If the roots are white and hard there is no need to remove the orchid. You can add medium, but do not damage roots as you work the new medium into the pot. I like to use puffed clay pebbles, which are round and easily flow into space between the roots without much effort.

If you do this and find mushy roots the orchid needs to be repotted. Remember that the longer the time between repotting, the more strength your orchid gets and the better the flowers will be next time. Roots are the key to good flowers and repotting removes the majority of them.

There are many orchids sold now in sphagnum. This is a soft medium that tends to stay moist. Typically, phalaenopsis are sold in this medium, but I have seen just about every orchid group sold in it. It is rare for sphagnum to last more than a year. If you can easily pull small pieces of medium from the pot when you purchase it, you likely need to repot the orchid as soon as it finishes flowering.

If you have a small collection, apply Nutricote now if you have not already done so. If you use a soluble fertilizer this is the time to be sure you water weakly, weekly. For cattleyas and other orchids with pseudobulbs, once new growths are mature, fertilizing is not as important, but right now, they are in the growth mode. Other genera, such as members of the vandaceous group, phalaenopsis, paphs, phrags and jewel orchids can be fertilized as long as it is warm. My preference is to use a balanced fertilizer with extra calcium and magnesium. Be careful not to use exotic fertilizers unless you know how it will affect the water pH. That is one of the reasons to recommend simple, slow release type fertilizers such as Nutricote.

Insects also respond to warmer conditions and need to be watched carefully. If scale or thrips are discovered treat quickly before they spread. If just a few are found on one plant remove the orchid and use a fine jet of water to remove the problem, being sure the underside of leaves and rhizomes are washed. If possible, isolate the plant for a month or so and watch it carefully. In my greenhouse, the orchid is sprayed thoroughly and the bench where it was found is also drenched in an appropriate pesticide and the entire area watched through the summer. Over time, most of my insect problems have disappeared, so it is rare for the entire collection to be treated.

This is also the time of year when snails and slugs seem to come from nowhere. Actually, they have been there all along, but the cool temperatures limited their activity. Now, instead of just grazing the algae near the bottom of a pot they emerge and munch on new roots and growths. There are many treatments that work well for these pests depending on your growing area and conditions. Some of these are toxic to pets so read labels carefully.