



St. Augustine Orchid Society

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## Potting in Tree Fern Baskets

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@hotmail.com

My orchid club got a phone call one day, were we interested in buying an orchid collection? Mary Hollingshead was an orchid grower in Jacksonville who died unexpectedly. When we went to her greenhouse to look around, we found a lot of well grown plants by an obviously experienced orchid grower. We learned a lot just by looking at her plants, realizing she had picked up many tricks on how to best grow her plants with interesting and new (to us) ways of staking and propagating them. She had lots of specimen sized plants, many growing in tree fern baskets.



Mary Hollingshead grew many different types of orchids in her smallish greenhouse, including many dendrobiums in tree fern baskets.



This Den. aggregatum potted in a tree fern basket was one of Mary's. It came home with me and has put on an annual show every year since 2011. The basket is still in fine shape 4 years later.



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**Tree Fern Pots.** Round tree fern pots are carved from the trunk of the giant tree fern found in South America. The tree fern has excellent drainage and aeration and functions both as the growing medium and the container. The pots are typically from 4 to 8 inches in diameter and 4 to 6 inches in depth, although larger pots are available. The hollowed out center of the pot tends to be smallish, maybe less than half the depth and width of the pot. The quality of the tree fern varies from being fibrous to dense, so care should be exercised in pot selection. The more dense pots will last for many years while the very fibrous pots probably should be broken into pieces and used as potting media inside another pot. The smaller sized pots can normally be found for about \$2 to \$5, so they are roughly equivalent in cost to clay orchid pots.

**Pot, Mount or Basket?** So many choices! Some people use tree fern baskets as a pot sitting on a horizontal surface so the pot can be brought inside and used as a centerpiece. Some people use them as a vertical mount, inserting a wire S-hook through the tree fern and tying the plant in place until it becomes established. This is a great way to grow phalaenopsis outdoors because the crown of the plant can be pointed downward allowing rainwater to easily drain. They make great horizontal baskets that can be suspended with wire hangers. The plants seem to acclimate very quickly to their new homes and the plant presentation is very attractive.



Seedling multifloral phalaenopsis like this Phal. Kuntrarti Rarashati have small root balls so they are easy to establish in a tree fern basket.



In the cattleya alliance, brassavolas and encyclias are the most suitable for tree fern baskets because the plants have tightly spaced pseudobulbs.



H&R Nurseries is a great source for vigorously growing seedlings, like this Den. Ise which has been in the tree fern basket for about 2 years.

**Select the Right Plant.** Choose a plant with tightly clustered pseudobulbs or canes for your basket. You want your plant to be happy in its new home for about the next five years, so you'll have to plan for the now and then.

- ★ *For the now*, you'll want a plant that is small enough to fit into the small opening in the pot, so think young. Dendrobium keikis from one of your friends are perfect. Seedlings in 2 inch pots work well.
- ★ *For the then*, you'll have to envision what the plant will look like in a couple of years. You'll want to avoid very tall plants or leggy plants with big spaces between



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pseudobulbs. Small cattleyas with densely spaced pseudobulbs, like many encyclias and brassavolas work well. Many of the dendrobiums are good candidates, including the pendulous seminobile dendrobiums like *Den. anosmum* or the Callista section dendrobiums like *Den aggregatum*.



The Dendrobium and Callista Section Dendrobiums are well suited to tree fern culture because they love to be grown in seemingly too small pots with almost monsoonal conditions during the growing season followed by a coolish, dryish winter rest before they burst into glorious blooms in the spring. It takes only a few years to grow into specimen plants like this *Den. anosmum* fma. *album* to the left and *Den. loddigesii* to the right.



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**Potting Your Plant.** If you're potting up a seedling in a small tree fern basket, set your seedling in the middle of the pot and pack AAA long fibered New Zealand sphagnum moss around it. Only use the highest quality sphagnum moss so the moss will last for about two years, and by then the roots will have grown in and through the tree fern basket. You can interlayer timed release fertilizer with the moss, particularly if you don't fertilize your plants routinely. If you don't like sphagnum or if you're using larger tree fern baskets, you can use your potting mix of choice, although you may not be able to hang your pot vertically.

**Hanging Your Basket.** If you're going to hang the pot horizontally as a basket, you can use a standard four strand 16 gauge wire hanger. You can use a thick gauge straight wire to punch holes in the basket as a guide so the thin wire of the hanger can be easily inserted, and then simply bend the wire horizontally or into a U shaped at the base of the basket. Better yet, find the 2 pronged 12 gauge wire hanger, hat tip to Michael Polen of Art Stone Orchids, available from orchid supply houses like Tropical Plant Products. This thicker gauge wire is much easier to push through the tree fern basket than the thinner 4 strand wire hanger.



Use a thick gauge wire to predrill holes for the wire hanger if you're using 4 strand wire hangers.



Insert the wire hanger through the predrilled holes or push the thicker double wire hanger through the basket.



Bend the hanger into a U shape and push it back into the base of the basket to secure it in place.



Center the seedling in the pot and pack with AAA long fibered New Zealand sphagnum moss.



Bulbophyllums like this *Bulb. laxiflorum* may also be good choices for tree fern baskets. Some can be leggy so keep a supply of floral pins handy so you can tack the bulbs back into the basket.

If you want to try growing in tree fern baskets, start with seedlings or plants that have a small root mass. Choose plants that like to be potted in smallish or shallow pots as well as lots of moisture during the growing season, particularly if you're surrounding the roots with sphagnum moss. If they like drier conditions during the winter, either move them to a drier spot or simply restrict



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water during their resting season. Choose plants that have densely clustered pseudobulbs or canes so they'll be able to grow for many years in the tree fern basket without disturbing the roots. Then kick back and wait for the blooms. You'll love the presentation in the tree fern basket and the increasing number of flowers you'll get with every passing year.