



St. Augustine Orchid Society

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Let the Repotting Begin - Catasetinae

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@gmail.com

When you see the new growths starting at the base of the catasetum bulbs, you know the repotting season has begun. If the plant needs to be repotted, this is the time. You want to have the plant in its new home before the roots begin to form under the new growth. If you start repotting after those roots start growing, it is almost impossible not to damage them. Much better to have them nestled in their new potting mix a few days before the roots emerge. You have perhaps a week or two of leeway to get into the repotting mode from the time that the new growth begins, so the first question you have to ask yourself is does my catasetum have to be repotted this year?



Check all your catasetums each week starting in December. Pull any that have started their new growths, like the one emerging in the very center of this image. Now is the time to repot this catasetum, if it needs to be repotted, so that it will be in fresh media before the new roots begin to form.

Does My Plant Have to Be Repotted? In days gone by, I used to repot all my catasetums each year. However, if they are potted in high quality potting media, the mix should remain in good condition for several years. If you are using sphagnum moss and you use the ridiculously expensive long fibered New Zealand sphagnum moss, the mix should last from one to three years. With other types of sphagnum moss, you will have to repot annually. With bark mixes, you should likewise get from one to three years before the mix starts degrading and deteriorating the root system.

Check whether the plant is well anchored in the pot. Some catasetums have a more horizontal growth pattern, where the base of the new bulbs form at about the same height as the older bulbs, while with others the new bulbs seem to form a little higher than the



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mother bulb. If last year's bulbs are not firmly rooted in the potting mix, then this year's bulbs will not be stable in the pot. These should be repotted this year so the roots grow into the mix from the base of the bulb to get the best growth and bloom presentation.



The old bulb has rotted and needs to be severed from the newer growth, plus the sphagnum looks like it is past its prime.



There are two keikis forming from nodes on the older growth, which suggests that growth is rotting. Remove the keikis and pot them.



When last year's growth is leaning in the pot it is not firmly anchored in the mix. Repot these so the new growth will be stable in the pot.

The other thing to evaluate is the general health of the pseudobulbs, particularly the oldest bulbs. It is not unusual for the older bulbs to be a little dessicated from their dry winter dormancy, but if there are soft spots or black markings, you may have some latent rot in the bulbs that should be removed. If you see keikis forming on nodes halfway up the plant, the likelihood is there is a rot problem that requires your attention.

Sometimes your catasetums begin their next growth phase without an intervening dormancy cycle. No worries, you can still repot the plant if it needs it. You will just use the condition of the roots to guide you in deciding how much of the existing root mass to keep or remove.



Clowesia Grace Dunn 'Chadds Ford' AM/AOS is a late bloomer, in the February/March time frame. Let it bloom first, and then repot when you see the new growths starting.

From winter through early spring, do a weekly check of all your catasetum varieties to see whether new growth has begun. These can then be moved to your staging area for repotting in the next few days. Typically the earliest Catasetums to rouse from dormancy are the tenebrosas and pileatums and their hybrids. The very warm December we had seems to have accelerated this year's growth so many of the intergenerics are also starting their growth cycle, including the Fredclarkearas and some Clowesetums. The winter blooming Clowesias and their hybrids like the Mormodias are some of the last to flower, blooming on leafless bulbs from January through March.



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Fluffed and moistened sphagnum moss with grated Styrofoam is my choice of potting media.

Potting Materials and Containers. You can grow catasetums in almost any potting mix or container as long as you adjust your watering habits to meet the plants needs throughout its annual growth cycle. Most catasetums have a dormant winter season, followed by a period of explosive growth in the spring until the bulbs mature in the summer and slowly harden off in anticipation of the coming dry season and dormancy. This means they require ample water and food during the growth season. My catasetums grow in an open shade house during the summer months where they get watered by Month Nature, including during the Tropical Storm Season. They are in clay pots filled half way up with Styrofoam and the upper half of the pot is mostly New Zealand Long Fibered Sphagnum Moss with either grated Styrofoam or sponge rock mixed in for improved

aeration. In spring they are watered every other day if it doesn't rain, and after the growths mature they may be watered every third or fourth day, with longer periods of drying out after extended rainfall events. You can always tell how well your system of potting and watering has worked during the subsequent year repotting when you can see the root system that developed inside the pot.



Some varieties, like this Fredclarkeara, grow multiple thick pseudobulbs with no hint of rotting in the older growths. These can be up-potted into larger pots keeping all the bulbs together for a great floral display later in the year.

If you have purchased a seedling catasetinae from Fred Clarke that is in sphagnum moss in a 3 inch pot, you can simply shift it into a 4 inch pot with a little extra sphagnum moss wrapped around the root ball. This approach also works when you have multiple healthy bulbs and the potting mix is still fresh. Depending on the size of your plant and how many bulbs you keep together, you might choose a pot or basket that is 4 to 8 inches across, but don't overpot. I use clay pots because I want them to breath and have the potting media dry more rapidly during the rainy season. Plastic pots do have some advantages. Besides being lighter, the plants will slip out of the plastic pots much easier than they do from clay pots.

Preparing the Plant for Repotting. The first order of business is removing the plant from the pot. I used to use a knife to cut around the inside edge of the pot to loosen the root ball. Now I commit the cardinal sin of dropping the pot in a bucket of water and letting it soak for 10 or so minutes, then hanging it for a few minutes to drain excess water. These prewet root balls can usually be pulled from the pot fairly easily.

You will wonder how many pseudobulbs should be put in a pot. With a cattleya, we are trained to keep at least 3 and hopefully 4 or 5 pseudobulbs to sustain the plant while it



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reestablishes. We know the cattleya will not grow new roots from the old pseudobulbs, but the moisture, minerals and carbohydrates in the backbulbs will nourish the plant similar to the humps on camels. This is also true of catasetums. For catasetums, one or two bulbs interconnected by the rhizome are all that is necessary, although you can leave more bulbs or you can put multiple front leads together in a single pot. The older bulbs should be inspected. Any with rot or soft spots should be removed and discarded. Older bulbs that would have to be buried deeper in the potting mix can be separately potted up or shared with friends. Some of the other varieties like Clowesias and their hybrids like Clowesetums, Mormodias and Fredclarkearas often have multiple bulbs in the pot. I tend to just move all these bulbs into the new pot and let them sprout new growths throughout the pot.



If the roots don't look great, just remove them. The new growths will rapidly produce a new set of roots.



Sometimes the roots are fat and happy and a simple haircut will suffice.

You will have to make a decision on how much of the old root mass to cut away. If the roots do not look healthy, simply cut the majority of the roots away leaving a carrot like stump to pot up. The plant will sprout one or two bulbs from the newest growth each year and these will develop a completely new root system while the older rootless bulbs nourish the plant. Sometimes, the newest growth has fat white roots that look too healthy to remove. You might just give these a haircut so they'll fit easily in the new pot.

Repotting. Situating the plant in the pot is easy. Fill the pot about halfway with peanuts. Drop in a thin layer of sphagnum moss and add some timed-release fertilizer. Then situate the plant in the pot. Put the bulb against the edge of the pot with the new growth facing toward the middle of the pot. If you're not sure where the new growth will emerge, simply place it in the center of the pot. Backfill with sphagnum around the mature bulbs, compressing it into the pot so the bulbs stand up. Top dress with timed-release fertilizer, replace the plant tag and insert the double wire hangers and you're done!

Here is the tough part. No water until the new growth is 5 or so inches tall and the leaves unfurled. By then, the new roots should extend to the bottom of the pot. Once the leaves unfurl, the risk of crown rot from watering is reduced and you can start watering, and watering and watering. You'll be amazed at how quickly the plants grow once they start. After all, they have to do all the growing and flowering during 8 or 9 months rather than the full year other orchids get.