



St. Augustine Orchid Society

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Repotting Phalaenopsis

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@gmail.com



They are still beautiful, but admit it, the flowers are starting to fade. Besides, you are starting to see new root growth. If they need repotting, put the flowers in a vase and get cracking!

The spring blooming phalaenopsis are attuned to the calendar. Let them be exposed to the cold weather for several weeks around Halloween, the flower trigger signal that tells them it is time to think about blooming. You should see flower spikes by Christmas and the first blooms around Valentine's Day. You will get 3 months of glorious blooms. By the time Memorial Day rolls around, it will be time to think about repotting. By Independence Day, they should all be tucked into their new homes so they can reestablish their root systems and get ready to do it all over again.



The thick roots are fat and happy, even after two years in the pot.

We have potted phals in many different types of media, coco husks, Pro-Mix, Sphagnum moss, etc. The long fibered New Zealand Sphagnum moss has many good qualities. The phal roots are fat and happy in it, but it is easy to overwater moss, particularly in the larger pots. We try to compensate by using clay pots, by using a bottom layer of Styrofoam and then interlayering crushed Styrofoam (or Sponge Rock) with the Sphagnum moss for improved drainage. We prefer the soft Styrofoam that comes in sheets and easily pulls apart into small spheres or packing peanuts, as opposed to the hard molded Styrofoam used for packaging electronics, etc. Some people are successful growing phals in bark mixes, including the SAOS coarse mix. The SAOS Pro-Mix/Sponge Rock blend is a good choice for those that



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are trying to transition their plants away from a moss media. Finding the high quality New Zealand long fibered sphagnum moss is difficult, and when you do find it, it is very expensive; we just paid \$170 for a 3 kilo bale.

Phals have a monopodial growth habit so they grow upward, adding a leaf or three every year and perhaps losing a lower leaf. Eventually they can get top heavy, and the new roots growing opposite the leaf axils have a long way to go to reach the potting media. Once they get unwieldy and before the potting mix breaks down, it is time to repot. My normal time between repotting is two years. I usually start with the ones that are finishing up blooming first and work my way through the bench.

The basic approach is to remove the plant from the pot and decide where to cut the stem. Ideally you would cut away any part of the stem that is rotten or woody, cutting until you get to green tissue. This means you will be cutting away the old roots, and some may still be healthy. If you are repotting at the proper time, you should see a flush of new roots starting to grow from the stem that will quickly grow into your medium. We help Mother Nature along by spraying root stimulator on the roots and stem after surgery. There are many products on the market, including seaweed and kelp, as well as synthetic hormones.

Once you have the plant prepared for potting, you situate it at the height you want it to sit in the pot. Fill the bottom third of the pot with Styrofoam, either before placing the plant or after the plant is situated. The Styrofoam provides an airy reservoir for the roots so they will not get waterlogged and rot. Then you can wrap Sphagnum moss around the roots. You can mix crushed Styrofoam or Sponge Rock into your moss to provide additional drainage, particularly important when you are using the larger pots where the moss would otherwise stay too wet. If one of the bottom leaves is yellowing, let it stay on the plant a little below the media level. The plant will reabsorb minerals from the leaf and ultimately it will yellow and drop from the plant.



Situate the plant in the pot with a twisting motion so it will be at the desired height in the pot.



You can add Styrofoam around the roots before or after placing the plant.



Wrap Sphagnum moss around the roots and interlayer with some crushed Styrofoam.

You find all kinds of interesting situations when you are repotting, and you have to adjust your technique to the situation at hand. The first ones we repotted were two that had plenty of nice, plump leaves but they were about 6 inches above the potting mix. The first had nice roots along a live stem so the decision about where to cut was easy, remove the lower section that was woody and beginning to rot. This one was situated in the new pot and then



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the Styrofoam was added in and around the roots in the bottom third of the pot and then Sphagnum moss with some crushed Styrofoam was wrapped around the roots in the pot.

The second phal had a bare stem between the plump upper growth and the bottom two older leaves with all the fleshy roots below that. Luckily, this one had a flush of new roots below the upper leaves so the whole bottom part of the plant was cut away. The pot was filled a third of the way with Styrofoam, then a layer of Sphagnum moss and then some crushed Styrofoam. Then the growth was situated in the pot with some more Sphagnum moss wrapped around it.



These top heavy phals are ready to go under the knife.



The bottom older growth was cut away, plenty of nice roots close to the leaves.



The fleshy roots were below the oldest leaves, so we cut just below the new emerging roots.



They look so much better when they have been repotted.

The next phal was really overgrown. It bloomed beautifully with 5 flower spikes. There were two plants in the pot, and one of them had two healthy basal keikis. The keikis were separated from the main stem with as many roots as possible, but we discarded the stem and any roots that were attached to avoid rot. We placed all four plants in the same pot, wrapping sphagnum around each. We backfilled the pot alternating moss and crushed



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Styrofoam layers to ensure good drainage in the large pot. This a way to conserve bench space as well as ensure many flowers the next spring.



There were two plants in this pot, and one developed two basal keikis.



The plants and keikis were separated so they could be situated at the same level.



Four plants dropped into the same pot, should be a good show!

Your approach to growing orchids is ever changing as you try new things, make mistakes and learn new tricks. My approach to repotting has evolved too. I tend to use only a portion of the upper pot for the potting media with a thick layer of Styrofoam chunks in the bottom, almost the reverse of semi hydroponics. Roots in the upper portion of the pot get their moisture and minerals from the relatively thin layer of potting media, and roots in the bottom portion of the pot get the air they crave. It is more similar to the way an epiphyte might grow in nature with roots in a mossy layer over a tree limb. This approach works cross genera, from cattleyas to catasetums to phalaenopsis. When repotting, you can see how well your prior year's approach worked. This year's repotting revealed healthy root systems growing with little root rot evident even after being in a pot for several years.