



St. Augustine Orchid Society

www.staugorchidsociety.org

Repotting Through the Year

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@gmail.com

Just like our garden plants, orchids struggle with transplant shock after repotting. Simply removing a plant from the pot disrupts the root system, then you cut away the older and tired part of the plant and give the roots a haircut, compounding the root damage. Sometimes the potting mix has broken down causing the entire root system to rot.

The best time to repot your orchid is when it is just beginning to grow new roots. Sometimes you can see a swelling on the stem or bulb and know the roots will emerge within days. This is the time to repot. The new roots will grow rapidly into the fresh mix and the plant will reestablish itself quickly with a minimum of transplant shock. If you do not follow this rule, the plant can become dehydrated, because the damaged root system cannot absorb water and nutrients very effectively.

The repotting marathon begins in January, when the winter dormant varieties begin to wake from their slumber. The *Catasetinae* having blooming seasons from summer through winter, depending on the genus. The summer blooming varieties are the first to initiate new growth after dormancy, while the fall and winter blooming varieties can lag months behind. As you see the beginning of new growth, it is time to repot them, a chore to be undertaken every year or every other year depending on your potting medium. Repot before the new, tender roots form. The new growth will show you how to orient the bulb in the pot, and let the roots grow into the fresh medium. You'll find yourself repotting different varieties into April, particularly the winter blooming *Clowesias* and their hybrids.



1. Repotting *catasetums* are hung into a protected area until the new roots and growths are 3 to 5 inches long.

2. Wait for the top growth to appear before watering the *habenarias*. You can spritz the top of the moss to encourage them to break dormancy.

February is good time to repot your other winter dormant orchids, like *habenarias*. The top growth has all died and the tuber at the base of the pot is ready for some fresh media. Jim Heilig has some good suggestions: Pot them a little low in the pot at first. After the first whorl of leaves unfurl, top the pot off with some more media so the stem will be supported by another 1/4" or so of potting mix. Consider inserting a bamboo skewer in the pot so you'll have something to stake the flower stem to later in the year (without puncturing the tuber).

February is also the time to repot your summer blooming *phalaenopsis*, if they need repotting. This will give them a chance to recover from transplant shock and be established by the time the summer blooming season rolls around.



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March and April are prime repotting season for many genera, including many cattleyas that initiate root growth at the same time as they initiate new growths. The unifoliate are much more forgiving of repotting at the wrong time, while this can be fatal for bifoliate. Some cattleyas start growing new roots when the new pseudobulbs are growing, and others finish growing their pseudobulbs and then rest a bit before the new roots emerge. Bill Rogerson's excellent article on orchid species culture contains a [tabulation](#) of when each cattleya species starts rooting, a great resource for the cattleya grower.



3. Cattleyas are so much happier after repotting, the ugly growths removed and plenty of spacing between plants for this year's growth.

4. Drop your bifoliate in an empty clay pot and wait for the new roots to emerge; then it is safe to repot, as the new roots will quickly reestablish the plant.

March and April are also a great time to rebasket or rehang vandas that have become unruly. They begin growing their new rootlets with the onset of the warm weather so they can quickly adjust to their new homes.

Dendrobiums, as a rule, resent repotting. The canes grow very close together, so they should be potted in a seemingly too small pot. Measure the distance between canes to estimate the annual growth rate, and select a pot that will accommodate the plant for 4 years or so. A low organic content potting mix should be used so you will not be forced to repot them because of a rotting mix. Often you will find you can just drop the pot in a larger pot or slip pot them into a slightly larger pot with a minimum of root disruption.



5. Enjoy your long blooming spring phals. Be prepared to cut the spikes and repot them so they can reestablish before the hot humid weather of summer.

By the end of May, the bulk of your repotting should be complete. The main exception to this rule is your spring blooming phals that are still flowering and your bifoliate cattleyas that have not yet started growing roots. Many phal growers cut off the phal spikes after Memorial Day and dedicate June to repotting all their phals. This gives the phals a little time to get their roots reestablished before the extreme heat of summer occurs. The spring blooming phals should all be in their new pots once Independence Day rolls around.



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As with many genera, it is often recommended to rebasket Stanhopeas in the spring after new growth begins, just prior to the initiation of new roots. If you miss this window or if you are concerned about damaging developing inflorescences, you can rebasket after they have finished blooming in summer to early fall. They will have enough time to get reestablished before the winter rest season. The Stanhopeas in wire baskets with a shallow layer of sphagnum moss. If the moss has started to degrade, you can often water jet away the decaying moss and insert fresh moss without doing too much damage to the roots.

July and August are dangerous months for repotting. The water molds thrive in the heat and humidity and easily gain entrance into your plants through the wounds incurred during the repotting process. Unfortunately, the bifoliate cattleyas often grow new roots in July and August, so you may have to repot them during this danger period. Extreme caution should be used. After you clean your plants, let them dry before cutting them. Dust wounds with a dry Banrot powder. Do not water after repotting, let the wounds seal over for a week or two before watering.

In mid September, the heat and humidity moderate, and the orchids respond with a growth spurt. You will start seeing green root tips, so you know any last minute repotting can be done during this brief window. If you start seeing new green root tips on your bifoliate cattleyas, this may be a good time to repot them. Spraying rooting hormones like Dip 'n Gro or seaweed extracts on the roots may give them some extra encouragement to grow so the plant can be reestablished before the winter rest season.

By the end of October, most of your orchids are responding to the cooler temperatures, shortening day length and lower sun angle by slowing their growth. Some simply rest during the winter months, while others go into full dormancy. Avoid repotting during the November and December months.

Spring is the main repotting season as this is when many genera are actively growing new leads and roots. Repotting during the hot summer months is problematic. The plants are struggling with the heat, pots dry more slowly with the high humidity, and this wetness increases disease pressure. If you must repot, be sure to keep the plant on the dry side for a week or two so the repotting wounds can seal off. Early fall is your last chance for repotting, when the temperature and humidity abates and you get a second growth spurt during which you'll see new green root tips. While some cooler growing genera relish the winter months, most of your orchids will be resting if not in a deep sleep so repotting should be delayed until spring.