



Why Do You Grow the Orchids You Grow?

Now It's Habenarias

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@hotmail.com

Has your taste in orchids changed over time? When you first start growing orchids, you buy everything in sight, all you know is that you need more, more! Cattleyas are my enduring favorite, the incredible flowers, the fragrance, perhaps that's why most of the benches and overhead poles are filled with them. But then you go to an orchid show and see something that you simply can't live without.

There are Many Genera of Beautiful Orchids You Can Grow



Phalaenopsis Olympia's Cameo x
Phal. Little Netsuke



Laelia purpurata var. schusteriana



Mormodia Lime Tiger
'St. Augustine' HCC/AOS



Renanstylis Bangkok Beauty



Angraecum eburneum



Stanhopea grandiflora

In the beginning it was phalaenopsis. When we were living in Houston, the Houston Orchid Society was a phalaenopsis club thanks in part to Bill Tippitt's breeding of multifloral phals. It was an exciting time for phalaenopsis, the hybridizing for yellows was in its heyday and the harlequin phals had just been introduced. How can you not love phals with their long lived graceful blooms?

Then one day Stephen Moffitt gave a presentation to the Galveston club about catasetums, so naturally I started growing them. What is easier than a plant that requires no winter care during its dormancy but grows like mad in the summer? Add Fred Clarke of Sunset Valley Orchids into the mix with all his beautiful and fascinating hybrids and there are new wows to tempt you every year.

Next there was the vanda phase, so many colors, sizes and shapes! After that it was the ephemeral stanhopeas. That addiction started with a Stanhopea grandiflora that bloomed 8 times in one year, can you spell hooked? It took a bit of observing how others succeeded with theirs and some trial and error until I could reliably rebloom them and by then I had almost two dozen different varieties. After that came the African angraecoids in their white



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and green glory, the dendrochilums with their chains of miniature flowers and... well, you get the idea.

This Year I Have a Habenaria Addiction



Hab. medusa



Hab. Regnieri

Roy Tokunaga of H&R Nurseries had some *Habenaria medusa* seedlings for sale when he came to talk to our club and I had seen pictures of this oddity and thought, why not? When it bloomed, it was love at first sight and the hunt was on for more. There have been many enablers along the way, including Thanh Nguyen of Springwater Orchids on the east coast and Peter T. Lin of Diamond Orchids on the west coast and several in between. Before the year was over, there were about two dozen habenarias in the greenhouse, orchids that grow from tubers and require a dry dormant winter.

That's how I found myself outdoors on a cold January afternoon with all these dead looking plants figuring out how I was going to repot them so they'd come back to life in the spring. The trickiest part is keeping the tuber oriented so the shoot end is pointing up and the root end is pointing down, easier said than done in that one end looks pretty much like the other. I think I made the wrong decision on one or two of them last year. For the similarly afflicted, this is what I have gleaned from reading about them and talking with other orchid growers.

Pot Selection. First, look for deeper standard size pots rather than azalea or bulb type pots. Don't use peanuts at the bottom of the pot because that's where the tubers will want to form. Use smallish pots, if you think you're slightly underpotting, you've probably chosen the right pot.

Potting Mix. Most folks suggest using either sphagnum moss or ProMix HP as your potting mix. I opted for a ProMix HP/sponge rock mix and top dressed with a little sphagnum moss so the soilless mix wouldn't wash out of the pot. If you use sphagnum, make sure you have the AAA grade, otherwise find a good soilless mix. Next year I may try a few in straight sphagnum moss packed tightly enough that the plants will stand up without support.



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When to Repot. After flowering, the vegetation starts to brown and the plant begins to enter dormancy. The tubers are still growing and storing energy for next year's growth so just limit your watering until the plant dies back. Don't be in any hurry to remove the dead top vegetation from the pot because that will help you orient the tubers properly during the repotting process.

Repotting Habenarias Can Be Tricky Business



Habenarias look like they're dead in winter, it's time to repot into your mix of choice.



This habenaria had nice healthy tubers found in the bottom of the pot.



Clean away the old mix and remember which end is up so you can orient it properly.



Its new home is a small standard size pot and a dry ProMix blend, though AAA grade sphagnum moss is another alternative.



Don't use peanuts because the tubers want to form at the bottom of the pot. Orient the tuber and backfill to the top of the tuber.



Top dress with a little sphagnum, coco fiber or something similar to keep the ProMix from washing out of the pot and then you wait.

Tuber Orientation. If you just knock the plant out of the pot and clean away the old potting mix like you would with other orchids, you'll find yourself saying oops, which end is up? The first time repotting, I held the tubers in my hand oriented top to bottom from depotting through repotting, to make sure they didn't get turned around. Often you can tell there is a pointy end from which the shoot grows that should be oriented up when you repot. But if you can't tell which end should be up, hedge your bets and lay the tuber sideways.

Then You Wait. Once your tuber is happily ensconced in its dry new home, put the pot someplace where it won't accidentally get watered. You have to wait until the tuber breaks dormancy and sends up a new shoot and then you can begin watering. If there is no new growth when all your other orchids have spring fever, you can give your habenaria an occasional sip to encourage it to start growing. Once it has a few inches of height, give it copious amounts of water and fertilizer during the growing season because like your other



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winter dormant orchids, it has to cram 12 months of growing into 7 or 8 months. In the fall the bloom spikes will emerge from the center of the plant, get ready for the show!

There are Some Wild Hybrids if You Can Find Them



Pectabenaria Wow's White Fairies
(Pec. (formerly Hab.) susannae x Hab. medusa)



Habenaria Jiaho Yellow Bird
(Hab. rhodocheila x Hab. medusa)

Orchid growers go through all sorts of trials and tribulations learning how to grow one type of orchid and then when they finally figure it out, they decide to start growing a different type of orchid. It is probably natural that our taste in orchids evolves over time. After all, if you look back at your recipes from several years ago you realize your ingredients and techniques have morphed over time... though you must be careful not to admit to a Louisiana native that you are now adding beans to the gumbo!