



St. Augustine Orchid Society

www.staugorchidsociety.org

Repotting Orchids – Wet or Dry?

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@gmail.com

I have always used water during the repotting process. First, to soften the roots so they can more easily be removed from the pot. Next, to water blast the potting media from around the roots, often with the hose end nozzle set on flat or jet. Then to clean up the plants, give them their Saturday night bath, remove the papery cataphylls from cattleyas, and mold or algae from leaves, etc. Then the other repotting tasks, giving roots a haircut, dividing an overgrown plant, selecting a pot, and splaying the roots over a base of Styrofoam and a bit of potting mix, filling the remaining space with potting mix, top dressing with a little New Zealand sphagnum moss and adding a bit of Purely Organic fertilizer followed by a Banrot drench. They always look so much better after they have been cleaned up and repotted.

Of course, if there are any viral particles or pathogens on that plant, the water really spreads them around to the potting surfaces and your hands. Newspapers used as a protective barrier get soaked and become ineffective. Any cuts you made on the plant are open wounds allowing easy access for pathogens directly into the plant. There are some points in the repotting process where water helps you achieve your goals, and some steps are better done dry to prevent unintended consequences.



1. Wet the roots an hour or so before repotting, and the plant will be much easier to remove from the pot.



2. Water blast the dried papery sheaths off and dislodge loose potting mix, but leave pieces if removal would damage the roots.



3. Cut away the old tired pseudobulbs and separate pieces into 3 to 5 pseudobulb clumps that will fit easily in the pot.

Water Plant. About an hour before you want to start repotting a plant, water it thoroughly and completely. This will give the roots a chance to soften and become pliable. If they have attached to the pot surface, they can be removed more easily. If they have to be untangled, they are more likely to bend than break. This final watering will have to sustain the plant until you next water it after repotting.

Clean plant. With the hose end sprayer set on flat, you can start cleaning the plant. Wash the medium away from the roots, blast the dried papery sheaths away from the pseudobulbs along with any scale or other pest that may be hiding there and blast any algae or mold deposits from leaf surfaces. If the newer sheaths are not easily removed with the water spray, let them remain. It is too easy to damage the tender young growths. Cut away the old and tired parts of the plant and separate it into the pieces you want to repot. Give the roots a haircut so they will fit easily into the top third or half of their future pot. Then set your cleaned up plant on some newspaper or Kraft paper and allow it to dry for a bit.



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4. Spray some root stimulator on the base of pseudobulbs and roots to encourage new root growth.

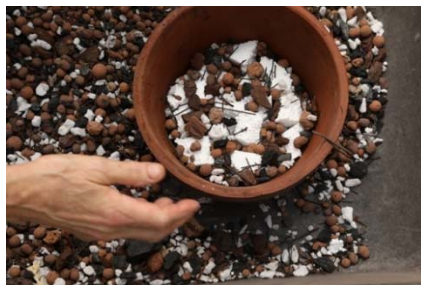


5. Let the plant dry and allow it to absorb the root stimulant prior to repotting. You can prepare multiple plants to repot.

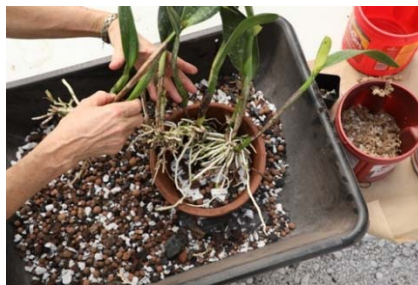


6. Wash your hands with Lysol All Purpose Cleaner as you finish with each plant and before you start the next one.

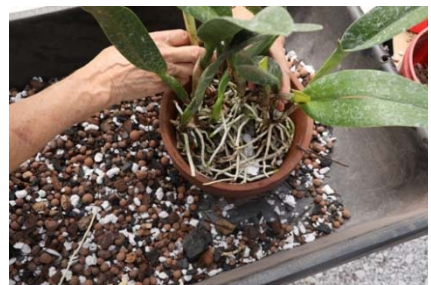
Root Stimulants. You can prepare your multiple plants for repotting, keeping plants with tags, in assembly line style. This is a great opportunity to spray the plant with one of the root stimulants. Whether you choose seaweed/kelp or one of the synthetic root stimulants like Dip 'N Grow, you can mix up your concoction and put into a spray bottle, and spray the base of the plants and roots while it is on its drying paper.



7. Fill the bottom third of the pot with Styrofoam, lava rock, etc. to provide an airy reservoir into which roots will grow.



8. Situate the pieces with the oldest part of the plant flush against the edge of the pot and splay the roots over the mix.



9. This approach allows plenty of room in the pot for this plant to grow into a specimen, but this will preclude AOS cultural awards.

Potting Mix. Some people advocate wetting the potting mix to prevent a dry mix from pulling moisture from the roots to dessicate the plant. Probably a bigger concern is all those open wounds on the roots that allow bacteria to easily enter the roots and cause problems. Keep the mix dry and allow the wounds to seal over. Sphagnum moss and cypress mulch are two exceptions to the keep it dry rule, they should be wetted first to allow proper packing around the roots. These two organic materials tend to have an acidic pH that is less conducive to bacterial growth.

Repotting. Your repotting regime probably follows the typical rules, add a layer of porous drainage materials in the bottom third of the pot (Styrofoam, lava rock, etc.), add a little potting mix and then orient the plant in the pot splaying the roots out and backfill with mix.



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You may finish up by top dressing with sphagnum moss or cypress mulch and adding Purely Organic or time-release fertilizer. Date your plant tag and reinsert it into the pot (some even have the foresight to add a second tag in the bottom of the pot in case the main tag is lost).



10. Backfill the pot with your dry potting mix of choice keeping the rhizome about even with the top of the potting mix.



11. Top dress with a little sphagnum moss and some Purely Organic fertilizer in a tea bag. .



12. Pour some Banrot solution through the pot and then keep it on the dry side for a few days, or until you see new green root tips.

After Repotting. To water or not to water, that is the question. Probably the best advice is not to water, allow time for the wounds to seal over and encourage the plant to grow new roots to seek out water. As a Serial Overwaterer, this is a very difficult decision for me. After repotting, I usually pour a Banrot solution through the pot as a protective fungicide. You can add root stimulants into the Banrot jug for some extra oomph. Then wait a few days to a week or two before resuming your normal watering practices. I can usually force myself not to water for at least two or three days. If you find yourself repotting during the hot humid months in July and August, restricting water is very important to avoid black rot from infecting your plants. As with any rule, there are always exceptions, and the restriction on watering after repotting can be ignored when potting in ProMix based mixes, which often have biofungicides or mycorrhizae, and have an acidic pH similar to sphagnum moss and cypress mulch.

If you have a convenient staging area, you could practice assembly line repotting. You would have a series of sterilized flats sitting on benches in a shady area away from water. You could place your cleaned up and trimmed plants along with their plant tags into the trays for a week or two, spraying occasionally with a root stimulant while the wounds heal and the plants shift into the root growing mode. Once you see new green root tips, you could finish the repotting process and water to your heart's content.