



St. Augustine Orchid Society

www.staugorchidsociety.org

What's in the Pot?

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@hotmail.com

If you're playing poker, you have a pretty good idea what is in the pot. When you buy an orchid, well, not so much. You might look at the mix at the top of the pot and assume that's what's in the rest of the pot, and sometimes you would be right. If you are right, you probably have a good idea of how to water the plant.



Clockwise from left: lava rock, sponge rock, charcoal, clay pebbles and Styrofoam in the center are all nonbiodegradable components of potting mix that promote airiness inside the pot.

Clockwise from left: New Zealand sphagnum moss, SAOS coarse blend with some sphag moss, bark based coarse mix, tree fern based coarse mix, lava rock and cypress mulch.

When choosing a potting mix, you are balancing its airiness (porosity) and its ability to retain moisture to meet your plant's needs.

Seedlings. When plantlets are deflasked, they are often dropped into plug trays in sphagnum moss or oasis, where they grow up enough to be transferred into larger containers. Some growers remove the water retentive material before potting up plants in a bark mix, and some simply drop the root ball and sphagnum together into the pot and backfill with bark. These seedlings and young plants are then offered for sale in small pots. If you water the pot when the bark is dry, the sphagnum moss will stay too wet and the roots inside will rot, and if you water the pot when the moss is dry, the bark will be too dry and the roots will dessicate. This can be less of a problem in a small 2 to 3 inch pot, but in larger pots it is a death sentence. At the potting clinics, we have seen instances where a plant in sphagnum moss was removed from a 4 inch diameter pot at the nursery, dropped into a 6 inch pot and then bark backfilled around the moss, and we have to administer the last rites 6 months later.

Mass Produced Phalaenopsis. Is there anyone that has not bought a phalaenopsis from the grocery or big box stores that is potted in sphagnum moss? These plants are often mass produced pot plants that many simply discard after blooming. To save labor costs, the grower pots them in tightly compacted sphagnum moss so they only need to be watered perhaps once every three weeks. You bring one of these into your growing area and water it with the rest of your plants, maybe every Saturday morning. After a while, the plant starts looking dehydrated and leathery so you repot it and find that the roots have all rotted, so you complain that sphagnum moss is the devil in disguise. The truth is: the plants grew great in



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sphagnum moss when they were only watered every three weeks when the moss deep in the pot approached dryness.

When you first start buying orchids, you buy anything from anybody if you like the flower. You don't spend much time looking at the plant itself, much less what the plant is potted in. As you keep collecting plants, you find you have a hodgepodge of different pots filled with moss, bark, clay pebbles, gravel and who knows what else, and you water all your plants on the same day, whether they need it or not. Unless you have the self discipline to decide whether each plant is ready to be watered, you should group together plants with similar light requirements and watering frequencies. A much simpler approach is to use a consistent potting mix that allows you to properly water you collection all on the same day.

You are always going to find plants from different vendors with flowers that are irresistible. Once your new plant is bloomed out, knock it out of the pot and take a look at the roots and the potting mix. You may decide everything is fine and drop it right back into the same pot, or you may decide to repot. You don't know how long the plant has been in the same potting mix or how much longer the potting mix might be viable and you may decide that the potting mix is incompatible with your watering habits. Repot it in your mix of choice for that type of orchid, particularly if the plant is growing new roots or if you can do this without damaging too many roots.



Brassavola nodosa growing happily mounted on a wall at the old Tropic 1 nursery in Kissimmee in 2007. Here an automated sprinkling system makes sure the plants get all the water they want.

Eventually, you learn who your trusted vendors are. You know how they grow their plants and what to expect from plants you buy. Plants bought from the trusted few can stay in their original potting mix, maybe just removing the plastic pot and dropping the plant into a clay pot. You know the mix is still good for a year or two by which time the plant will outgrow its container.

If you had unlimited time, you could grow all your orchids mounted or in open baskets/pots and water them one or three times a day and never have to think about potting mixes. Keep your roots happy, select a potting mix that works for your watering habits and time constraints as well as your orchids' needs.