

REPOTTING AN *Orchid*

The work is simple and short, the benefits to your orchids are great.

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When an orchid grows vigorously enough to require repotting—indicated by the first signs of fresh growth either as tiny green root tips or leaves appearing at the base of a young pseudobulb—you should congratulate yourself, and take a deep breath.

There are important differences between repotting an orchid and any ordinary houseplant. First, orchids require a special medium, or potting mix. Good orchid mixes are available from many specialist growers and good garden centers.

A good medium consists primarily of chipped bark or tree fern with various additional ingredients such as charcoal, pumice, perlite, or sphagnum moss. Orchid roots are adapted to alternating periods of moisture and dryness so the mix must be free draining. Always buy more than you think you need. Some

hours prior to repotting, soak the new mix in a bucket of water at room temperature. This will help the orchid roots to establish quickly.

Second, when repotting an orchid it is not worth retaining the old growing medium. It should be discarded since it may have begun to decompose and such conditions can lead to a swift fungal infection of the orchid roots and pseudobulbs.

1. When removing the plant from its original pot, coax the roots gently from the sides, to which they may be stuck. It may even be necessary to carefully break or cut the pot to avoid breaking too many roots. The larger, harder roots of a phalaenopsis can be softened by dipping them in warm water for a few minutes before beginning the process.

2. Some root pruning is generally necessary when repotting. Roots that are discolored, soft or broken are probably dead and should be removed. Using sharp scissors, cut them near the base of the pseudobulb or stem. If you are repotting more than one plant at the same time be sure to sterilize the scissors thoroughly between plants. Moreover, each plant should be prepared for repotting on a fresh sheet of newspaper. These precautions will help prevent the spread of viruses.

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3. The new pot should be only marginally larger than the original. A thin layer of coarse gravel may be placed in the bottom to maximize drainage. Alternatively a few chunks of polystyrene will do the job.

4. Orchids with pseudobulbs, such as oncidium, cymbidium, or cattleya, must be carefully positioned, with the oldest growths as near to the edge of the new pot as possible. This will mean that the youngest pseudobulbs, from which new growth will sprout, are closer to the center, allowing maximum space for new roots. Any orchid without pseudobulbs should be positioned centrally like any other houseplant. Always situate the orchid at the same level that it grew at in the previous pot.

5. The soaked bark can now be added to the pot, firmed gently by hand; use of a wooden stick or small trowel will cause unnecessary stress. Staking offers greater stability to the plant as it re-establishes and will encourage the quick formation of new roots. The stake should be placed where it will not impede the development of new growth. Tie the orchid loosely to the stake with plastic twist ties.

6. Once your orchid has been repotted, give it a thorough soaking with plain water, followed by



two weeks of total abstinence from watering and fertilizing. During this time, the orchid should be kept away from bright light, with a higher humidity maintained by frequent misting and occasional sprinkling of water over the surface of the potting mix. After its two-week retreat, it may be returned to the environment in which it grew before, where those young leaves and roots should continue to develop until they are equal in size to the older growths. ♡

The new pot should be only marginally larger than the old one.

Choosing the Right Container

Most of the orchids offered for sale are epiphytes, a term used for plants that thrive high in the limbs of trees, usually in pockets of accumulated debris that absorb water rapidly. But like laundry on a line, their airborne locations also cause them to dry out quickly after rainstorms. Over eons of evolution, such plants have become accustomed to this cycle, and will languish or perish outright if it is not mimicked when they are cultivated in pots.

For this reason, most amateur orchid growers prefer clay pots, with porous walls that dry quickly. A newly purchased plant may, for all that, be sold

in a plastic pot, which is a convenience to mass growers. It should be transferred into a clay one shortly after it has ceased flowering.

Ordinary clay pots, the kind from the local garden center with a single drainage hole in the bottom, may be all that is available. In that case, they should be deep, and approximately one third their depth should be filled with broken pottery shards. Specialty supply companies will offer pots specially designed for orchids, with additional drainage holes and often with slashes halfway up the walls of the pot for additional drainage and root aeration.

Such pots are always best for orchids with pseudobulbs, such as cattleyas—which store much of the moisture they need and are particularly intolerant of sodden roots.

Orchid cages are also available, consisting of small wooden slats carpentered into a shallow box with air spaces between. These provide maximum drainage and aeration, and are useful for almost all orchids, as it is practically impossible to overwater when using them. Besides, when hung in a windowsill or in a home greenhouse, they enhance the exotic look that any orchid should have. —Ed.