

ORCHID REPOTTING BASICS

Alex Nadzan, Palomar Orchid Society, Updated 2025

I. A STRONG HEALTHY ROOT SYSTEM IS OF PRIME IMPORTANCE TO THE SUCCESSFUL GROWING, MAINTAINING AND BLOOMING OF YOUR ORCHIDS

II. WHEN TO REPOT YOUR ORCHID?

- a.** Best time to repot nearly all orchids is DURING ACTIVE PERIODS OF ROOT GROWTH (roots with green or reddish tips), just as the roots are emerging. Usually occurs when plants are initiating new growth of pseudobulbs or after blooming, but not always. Some members of cattleya alliance produce new pseudobulbs prior to sending out new roots, so repot them only when new roots begin to appear. Paphiopediums are an exception. They can be repotted almost anytime and benefit from fresh medium. Cymbidiums are best repotted after blooming but can be done anytime later in season, if necessary.

III. REASONS TO REPOT

- a.** Orchid has outgrown pot
- b.** Medium has broken down
- c.** Want to change medium to suit your growing conditions. New plants, particularly from Hawaiian growers, can be a problem as well as plants grown in sphagnum moss (phals)
- d.** Plants are not growing well in existing medium
- e.** Desire to multiply (divide) plant

IV. REPOTTING TIPS

- a.** Use gloves and clean tools (sterilize all tools or use sterile, disposable razor blades, potting sticks, clean surfaces, etc) to avoid transmission of disease or viruses from plant to plant.
- b.** Remove plant from pot and discard old media and dead roots. Try not to disturb viable roots with attached media, which are usually on lead pseudobulbs of plant produced during the previous growing season.
- c.** Use repotting time as an opportunity to clean up plant by removing dead leaves, old pseudobulbs, and spent sheaths or spikes. Check for disease and remove any scale (soap or alcohol and old toothbrush) from bulbs, rhizomes and leaves. Scale tends to hide under old protective sheaths of the pseudobulbs and flower sheaths, so be sure to examine plant carefully and remove any visible scale.
- d.** Add styrofoam peanuts (not biodegradable ones) or small stones to bottom inch of pot to aid air circulation and drainage.
- e.** Do not over pot, since most orchids like to be root bound. Use smallest pot to accommodate roots and allow up to 2 years growth. Place back of plant (old growths) at back edge of pot to allow for growth from newer leads in the front of the rhizome. For orchids that are grow in multiple directions, position plant in center of pot.

- f. If plant is not vigorous and roots are not very healthy, place in smallest pot possible to encourage new root growth. Can use sphagnum moss to stimulate root growth.
- g. If plant has over grown the pot and the medium is in good shape, you can just up pot (also called slip potting) by placing the plant in the center of the larger new pot and fill in with fresh medium. This process also can be done if plant is not in active growth as long as the roots are not disturbed.
- h. Avoid damaging new roots and new growths during potting process.
- i. Type and size of media should be proportional to size of pot and root type. For smaller pots (2-3") use finer medium, for pots (3-5") use medium bark and for larger pots (5" and above) use large medium. Also, fine roots prefer fine medium, while medium to coarse roots do well in larger medium. Terrestrial and semi-terrestrials need a moisture retentive medium.
- j. Repotting media – use good quality bark (Kiwi bark) and medium to coarse perlite (a ratio of 3:1) – works well for cattleya, oncidium and dendrobium alliances. Some use charcoal or other inert material to open up mix and improve drainage. Size of bark gauged to size of pot, thickness of roots. Paphs use fine or fine/medium mixed bark and perlite with some added charcoal. Most cymbidiums do well in bark or coconut husk chips (pre-soaked three times to leach out salts) or in bark/perlite mix (3:1). If they are doing well in a given medium don't change it.
- k. Keep newly potted plant in shadier spot for a week or two and on the drier side after the initial watering.

V. RESOURCES

Texts for beginners and advanced hobbyists (paperbacks):

Miracle-Gro's Complete Guide to Orchids, Ned Nash, Steve Frowine, Meredith Books, 2008.

Orchids for Dummies, Steven A. Frowine, Wiley Publishing, 2005.

Online – Many websites have good information and/or videos on repotting and many other aspects of orchid growing and some have orchid supplies. These are a few good ones:

Amazon for miscellaneous orchid supplies at <http://www.amazon.com>

American Orchid Society at <http://www.aos.org>. Most of the info is free. Have lots of pics of examples of diseases and pest damage plus videos on repotting.

St. Augustine Orchid Society at <https://staugorchidsociety.org>. One of the best and most extensive compilations of info on orchids. Sue Bottom writes most of the articles for the site and for the AOS magazine on many topics.

rePot me website: <https://www.repotme.com/pages/all-orchid-care>

First Rays Website, a more scientific basis on orchid growing: <https://firstrays.com>

Local Supplies (the most economical sources I have found):

Premixed orchid bark, small quantities: Home Depot (HD), Lowes or Walter Anderson Nursery (WAN) for small and larger quantities. Sales at SDCOS Orchids in the Park shows.

Kiwi orchid bark (small, medium, large) and perlite (medium and coarse, No.3) – Fred Clarke, Sunset Valley Orchids, Vista, CA <http://www.sunsetvalleyorchids.com> Ph: 760.639.6255; Cell: 619.948.5942; email: fred.clarke@att.net. You cannot visit his nursery anymore but can arrange to get some supplies from Fred or Carlos. Plants can be purchased on-line through his website but no retail sales on site.

General Orchid Supplies: bark, charcoal, regular and coarse perlite, clear plastic pots and misc. orchid supplies - Calavo Gardens, La Mesa, CA, Ben Machado, Ph&Fax: 619.660.9810; Cell: 619.948.5942; email: bnmach16814@aol.com

Larger quantities of supplies, bark, charcoal, fertilizer (25 or 50 lb. bags) – Nutrien Ag Solutions (formerly Crop Production Services), San Marcos, CA (<http://www.cpsagu.com>) and at WAN.

Coconut husk chips – Karl Batchman, Casa de las Orquideas, Solana Beach, CA <http://www.orquideas.com> Ph&Fax: 858.755.7572, email: casa@orquideas.com. The Batchman's website also contains excellent, detailed instructions on dividing, repotting and propagating cymbidiums.

Plastic and latex gloves – Smart & Final (SF), Harbor Freight (HF)

Single edge razor blades (100 packs, HD or HF), clay azalea pots (3 & 6 inch, slotted orchid or plain), bamboo stakes, and small amounts of orchid bark (HD or Lowes), clay azalea pots (4 inch) – WAN and Green Thumb Nursery