

### Orchid division

Most of the common orchids are relatively easy to propagate; so much so that by simple division your collection will naturally grow quickly. As space is always limited, consider exchanging or passing on some divisions to friends.

Division with a sharp sterile instrument will prevent your orchid becoming large and unmanageable. Some growers treat the cut ends with a sulphur powder but this is not essential. Inspect the divisions for pests and diseases, remove any dead material and clean up any infestations. I usually then spray the entire plant including the roots with Eco-oil, pot up and leave for a week or two in a shady position before watering. I like to see two old shoots or bulbs and one or two new shoots in a division but the amount and quality of the root system is also important. If the roots are very poor, wrap in sphagnum moss until they shoot. Do not bury the rhizome in the potting mix as this will predispose the plant to being attacked by scale insects.

For minimum disturbance of the plant, back-cutting the rhizome (between the bulbs) of large sympodial plants such as Cattleyas can encourage new shoots from each section while leaving the plant otherwise undisturbed. The divisions should not be smaller than three or four bulbs and it should be done during active spring growth. Months later when time comes to repot, all the hard work is done, as the advanced divisions should all have new shoots and fall apart easily at repotting.

Orchids which tend to climb out of their pot are usually easy to divide, but some become inextricably bound to the pot. One option is to place the whole pot in a second larger pot of mix without disturbance. These establish quickly and can be divided later or allowed to grow into a specimen plant.

Back bulbs left over after division will often shoot if the roots are removed. Trim off the roots and bury the lower third of the bulb in moist orchid potting mix if the weather is warm. In cooler weather trimmed backbulbs can be placed in sealed plastic bags with a little moist sphagnum moss, then hung in a cool shady area of the orchid house. Once the green shoots are a reasonable size they be potted up and transferred to a warm situation with reasonable light. In cold weather I protect these small plants with a Bell jar made from half a plastic drink bottle.

Patience is essential because it may take years before the plant reaches flowering size. For a valuable plant it is worth the wait. Many orchid genera can be propagated in this way, although best results are usually obtained with a group of several connected bulbs unless the singles are large.

“Keikis” are small rooted shoots which appear on the canes of many species such as soft cane Dendrobiums and Phalaenopsis. Once the roots are well developed, the keikis can be harvested and placed directly into potting mix. This is best done in the spring. Some keikis will benefit from a small pack of sphagnum moss tied about the roots and kept moist. When the roots are well developed and the plant is growing actively they can be separated from the parent plant. Stem cuttings are interesting variants on this. Thunias can be induced to shoot from the old leafless canes if cut into 6 to 8 cm segments and placed in water. The spent flower stalks of the swamp orchid, *Phaius tankervilleae* can be similarly treated or cut into segments containing an eye and placed on moist potting mix.

None of these techniques is foolproof but your yield will improve with practice. Don't forget to make up a durable plastic label for each plant, preferably written in pencil which does not fade like most garden markers. Labels are particularly likely to be lost from small plants so secure them well.