

Repotting: why and when

By Dr Fred

Like most orchid fanciers, I find repotting something of a chore which is easy to put off and becomes more difficult as your collection expands. It is worth reviewing the reasons why repotting is important for orchid wellbeing.

Potbound

When an orchid becomes pot-bound, growth is impeded and it tries to grow out of the pot. At this stage water often runs off rather than through the mix. The roots are wound tight inside the pot and there seems to be little mix left. Breaking up the plant can then be difficult, although soaking the plant in water for a few hours beforehand will make it easier.

The basic problem is usually breakdown of the mix. The deeper roots become compromised, growth stops and the plant becomes prone to disease. Some potting mixes break down faster than others and if one plant needs repotting, all from that cohort will usually be in need. If your mix breaks down too fast, change it. Finer mixes break down faster than chunkier ones.

Pot-bound orchids also seem to be the preferred home of weeds, slugs, snails, scale and other pests which contribute to the plant's downward spiral. Some orchids also have a growth pattern with overlapping rhizomes which makes plant hygiene difficult without frequent divisions.

When repotting you get to have a close look at each plant, including the roots (which are the best guide to its health), the underside of the leaves and those little nooks and crannies under dead husks where beasties thrive.

Hopefully, you will repot earlier rather than later, when the task is easier and before growth is impeded. Often all that is needed then is a slightly larger pot (potting-on) as the spring growth spurt begins. For small, rapidly growing seedlings this may be needed every year. For larger plants every two or three years will suffice.

Not thriving

An important reason to consider repotting is the plant which is not thriving. I will often knock an orchid out of its pot just to check the roots because so many problems start there. The only evidence of scarab grubs for example will be a rapid plant decline.

Plants which are struggling because of over-potting can often be saved by simply transferring to a smaller pot with new mix.

There are situations so serious that a one way trip to the tip for all but the most valuable orchids saves a lot of time. Usually they involve breakdown of the mix to the point that drainage fails and fungal infection develops. This often shows up as root loss, brown or black spots on the leaves and a

progressive decline in wellbeing. Repotting and a fungicide is good initial treatment, then addressing any predisposing factors such as over feeding, overwatering, salt build-up, poor ventilation and poor aspect. Relocation is often also needed.

New purchases

It is also worth repotting all new purchases into your preferred mix. Even if the orchid is well potted, the mix may not suit your growing conditions and there is merit in having all your collection in the same mix for uniformity of feeding and watering.

Stacking

Is an alternative to repotting used by the cut flower trade. This trick encourages the orchid to grow back over itself, often repeatedly for a number of years. The plant continues to flower year after year. You must have a potting mix which does not significantly degrade and a program for deterring pests and insects.

Caution

Some orchids should carry “do not disturb” signs and not be repotted without due consideration. This is particularly important in slow growing species and those which only flower when they have reached a certain size. *Bifrenaria harrisoniae*, *maxillarias* and *brassia verrucosa* are good examples. Similarly, some *dendrobiums* also prefer a smaller crowded pot.

Some orchids are therefore more suitable than others to grow into specimen plants. Many *Coelognes* for example, will happily spill out of the basket for years and need little attention.

On the other hand some orchids including *odontoglossums* and *miltoniopsis* thrive and flower better if divided into a couple of mature bulbs with new leaders early in their growth cycle. These orchids will not tolerate stale mixes.

Some orchids such as *laelias* also seem to dislike the build-up of leafless bulbs and do much better if most of these are removed at the start of the growing season.

Leave elective re-potting until signs of active growth appear following flowering or dormancy. Try to avoid it in the heat of summer or when flower spikes are forming, but if you have a big collection it is a task best spread over the year.