

Orchids in Spring

Spring cleaning isn't just for carpets and cupboards. Orchid collections benefit from regular clean ups as well. Most of us will have had our orchids crowded into winter quarters for the last few months so it is timely to do a thorough check of each plant and make sure they are in optimal health for the growing season and that the growing area is clean and free from pests and weeds.

Before you start make sure you have all of the equipment in place to ensure that you will not be spreading any potential disease among your orchid:

- cutters and any other tools will need to be sterilised between each use using a sterilising solution or sterilising torch;
- have a clean work surface for each plant such as a fresh sheet of newspaper; and
- fresh gloves or provision to wash your hands thoroughly between handling different plants.

Start by picking up and checking each orchid. Remove old sheaths, dead racemes and leaves, trim any die back and get rid of any weeds. A pair of tweezers is very useful but be sure to sterilise them between plants. As you examine the plant you can decide whether it requires repotting. Check for:

- emerging new roots indicating active growth;
- broken down potting media which leads to a lack of air space around the roots;
- leaf tip dieback which may indicate salt build up;
- orchids that need a larger size pot to accommodate new growth; or
- orchids that need dividing because they are too big or have lots of old pseudobulbs.

By cleaning up each orchid before repotting or rehousing it in the cleaned up growing area you can save yourself a lot of future stress. Isolate any orchid that has strange markings on the leaves. These should be checked for virus. Look for pests such as aphids, mites, scale or mealybugs and deal with them. Look for signs of damage to the leaves or roots which may indicate snails or slugs and treat accordingly.

Many orchids need reduced watering and little or no fertiliser during winter but as the weather starts to warm up these orchids will start their active growth cycle. Orchids that don't require repotting can be replaced in the growing area making sure that they have adequate light and space for the growing season. This is the time to increase watering frequency and to begin to fertilise. Light is important as plants convert light into energy so good blooming depends on adequate light.

Repotting

This is a general guide as different genera will require different potting treatment. The best time to repot is when the orchid is in active growth so if you see new roots starting to emerge they will appreciate fresh potting media.

1. Prepare your materials and equipment – potting mix, clean pots, sterile cutting tools, stakes and ties or clips, new labels and labelling pen, cinnamon or fungicide, gloves and disposable paper to cover work surface.
2. Remove orchid from its old pot.

3. Loosen the roots and clean out old media from around the roots being careful to avoid damaging new growing tips.
4. Cut off any dead, soggy or damaged roots.
5. Cut off any unwanted backbulbs or pseudobulbs that have already flowered (these may be used for propagating new orchids if suitable).
6. Divide plant if it is too big keeping a minimum of three growths together for a viable division.
7. Dust any cuts with a fungicide or use cinnamon which is a natural fungicide.
8. Choose a new, clean pot big enough to accommodate two years growth.
9. Position the plant so that the oldest part of the orchid is at the edge of the pot and the growing lead near the centre so that new leads and roots stay within the pot.
10. Carefully add potting mix tapping the pot often to ensure that the mix settles closely all around the roots and tamping gently so the orchid is not wobbly. Stay and clip or tie.
11. Make new label if necessary and note the date repotted on reverse.
12. Water the freshly potted orchid well using a seaweed or plant starter liquid fertiliser to help the orchid overcome transplant shock.
13. Place it in moderate shade allowing it to recover for a couple of weeks before resuming normal watering and fertilising.
14. Clean the potting space, your hands and sterilise any tools before starting on the next plant.

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