

Growing Orchids in Sphagnum Moss

Over the years there has been many new potting mediums come to the fore to be tried by orchid enthusiasts in their quest to grow strong and healthy plants which will reward them with quality flowers. Some that quickly come to mind are granulated cork, macadamia shells, kanunda shell and absorber stone. Through the passage of time these have fallen out of favour or have been superseded by the latest potting medium which is claimed to be the best yet. Through my experience over the years there are two mediums that seem to give very good results consistently, these are bark and sphagnum moss.

I had always used bark and while I had fairly good results with flower quality I always felt I could improve the culture and quality of the plant its self. A couple of years ago I sought advice from some very experienced growers who were using sphagnum moss very successfully and getting excellent results. I then set about to completely change my entire collection (mainly cattleyas) over to sphagnum moss. It was a bold move at the time as I had tried sphagnum moss a few years earlier with terrible results on an experimental group of plants. I must admit I did no research and tried to grow these plants along side other plants growing in bark. The end result was I over watered, killed all the root system and lost about half the plants.

I repot all year round as required if the plant is in active growth and I also find the plant does not suffer any stress even in the cooler months. After the plant has been prepare for potting I place about three centimetres of fifteen millimetre cubed polyfoam in the base of a one fifty millimetre pot. I then put a bed of moss on the foam, place the plant on the moss and proceed to fill the pot. The moss is packed down around the roots quite firmly using the thumbs. The top is evened out and covered with three to five millimetre washed gravel ensuring the eyes of the pseudo bulb are not covered. The purpose of the gravel is twofold, firstly it tends to prevent drying out and secondly to inhibit moss growing on the top of the medium. Plants very seldom require staking as they are held firmly in place by the sphagnum moss. Also if staking is required remove the stake as soon as the plant is stable as sphagnum moss does not like foreign intrusion and it will go black around the stake if left in the pot.

A controlled programme of watering is essential as it is very easy to over water due to the high moisture retention of sphagnum moss. As a general rule water once a week in summer and once a fortnight in winter. Bear in mind drying winds in winter will necessitate more frequent watering than once each two weeks. If a plant has been allowed to dry out it will require a good soaking as the water tends not to penetrate the dry top crust. I find the best method to check if plants require watering is to press your finger into the medium to test the degree of moisture content. Remember to water during the morning to allow the plants to dry out during the day.

I fertilize the day after watering using a high potassium fertilizer all year round and about every third or fourth occasion in summer I use a high nitrogen fertilizer. Unlike plants growing in bark they do not seem to require the frequency of high nitrogen fertilizer.

I find that the mini cattleyas thrive in sphagnum moss and once established tend to send out many new leads which in turn makes them nice little specimen plants with many flowers. The larger exhibition cattleyas can grow into quite large specimens if allowed to and can quickly out grow the pot. Other genera I have observed growing very well in sphagnum moss are Oncidiums, Miltonias, Masdevallias and Paphiopedilums.

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