



Surrey, BC, Canada
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Repotting Orchids

Media: Many of the beautiful orchids sold as houseplants are epiphytes; in nature, they would use tree branches and trunks as support and have air roots. To simulate this environment in a pot, orchids should be planted in very airy media that will not choke the roots as potting soil would. Many materials have been used to grow orchids: bark chips, sponge rock, charcoal, expanded clay pellets, pumice, lava rock, tree fern fiber, coconut husk, various mosses, peat, even shredded tires. Most commonly, orchids are grown in a media containing several of those materials in various proportions.

Bark based media is recommended. You can either mix your own or buy a premixed bag. If you are repotting only a few orchids, the ready mixed media will save you buying large bags of several materials which you may not use often and will need to store. Mixing your own media allows you to customize the mix and may be more economical if you have hundreds of orchids. Most commercially available media are bark based. Bark and other organic components, will decompose in time and as the chunks of bark break down to smaller pieces, the roots receive less air and start to “choke”. For this reason, orchids in bark based media should be repotted every 18 to 24 months. Potting *Phalaenopsis* in long fiber sphagnum moss is gaining popularity. The length of the sphagnum fibers is very important as chopped sphagnum will stay very wet and will not provide as healthy an environment for the roots. Sphagnum will break down a little faster than bark based media and will need repotting every year.

Pots: The primary purpose of repotting is to provide fresh media, not necessarily a larger pot. Pot size should be selected according to the size of the root mass. The roots should fit snug in the pot. Orchids like to be a little tight in their pots but root breakage should be kept at a minimum. Overpotted orchids will tend to concentrate their energy on root growth. They may not show new growth or foliage for several months after being repotted in a pot that is too large. Orchids may be potted in plastic, clay or decorator pots. The type of pot selected may influence watering frequency. Plants in clay pots will need more frequent watering as they will dry a little faster.

Always select pots with drainage holes, orchid roots in contact with standing water will rot and die, killing the plant. Media in the center of larger pots may remain wet for long periods and become an unhealthy environment for roots. This can be avoided by placing a layer of Styrofoam chips in the bottom of the pot (make sure they will not dissolve by putting some in a bowl of water for a while). A smaller pot inverted into a larger one also helps with drainage and aeration. The roots of the plant are placed over and around the smaller pot and media is added around. Some orchids, such as *Phalaenopsis*, have roots capable of photosynthesis. For these plants, clear pots have become popular since they allow light to get to the roots.

Procedure: The name tag in your orchid’s pot is very important. If you lose the tag, you will likely never be able to find out the plant’s name as there are over 100,000 hybrids and 30,000 species. All parts of the name contain important information. Make sure the tag is still legible



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and not brittle; replace it if necessary. Remember that most inks will fade in sunlight (even permanent ones) and some will wash away with water. We use a good old fashion pencil. Mark the date of repotting on the tag so you will know when it is time to repot again. Take the plant out of the old pot and remove as much of the old loose bark as you can without damaging the roots. There will be some pieces of bark that have adhered to the roots and that will be very difficult to remove, those may be left rather than risk damaging the roots. Damaged, dried up and unhealthy roots should be trimmed with disinfected (see box) scissors or pruning shears. Cutting instruments should be disinfected after every cut to avoid spreading diseases to healthy parts of the plant or to another healthy plant. Position the orchid in the pot.