St. Augustine Orchid Society

www.staugorchidsociety.org

Orchids in Winter

December 2001

by Dr. Courtney Hackney, hackneau@comcast.net

Orchid Growing Tips

No matter how many years one has been growing Orchids, each year is a little different and this year has been no exception. Fall in the Carolinas has been extremely dry with wonderful bright days and few clouds. This is similar to the weather in Southern California where there were once many Orchid nurseries. Typically, short winter days and low light lead to over watering, but not this year.

Aquifers and rivers are at record low levels and this can mean a change in the quality of water coming out of the tap. Hobbyists along the Coast that obtain water from home wells should be especially wary of changes in the taste of water, as salt intrusion can occur. Your Orchids will notice before you do. Community water systems, even those obtaining water from well systems, must monitor water quality. If you have a question about the quality of the water from your tap the local water system can provide you with the level of dissolved solids in the water or you can purchase an instrument that will provide this for around $50. These Conductivity instruments are also handy when you fertilize because you can measure the quantity of fertilizer you are adding to your water.

This time of year there is little need to fertilize Orchids as they are not generally in a high growth mode. There is always a little residual fertilizer bound to the bark, pot, and other parts of the media, which is usually enough for the plant's needs during winter. Because of the lower light and heat levels, Orchids require less water. It is a good idea to wait an extra day after you are sure the plant is ready for water before watering. The only downside to letting your Orchids get a little drier than usual is that any fertilizer or salts in the water bound to the media can be concentrated by extra drying. To counter this phenomenon, water plants very thoroughly when you do water. This is best accomplished by wetting the plant and pot thoroughly the first time around and after you finish all plants, water thoroughly again. This allows salts bound to media to dissolve and then be flushed from the pot.

It is surprising how much salt can accumulate each year in a pot and media if proper watering is not done. Most novice growers ask how often to water, but do not realize that the nature of Orchid roots and the media they are grown in makes them different than most house plants whose roots take up water almost immediately. Orchid roots must be wet for at least a few minutes before they shift from a water conservation to water uptake mode. You can observe the phenomenon in Orchids in baskets as roots turn green and get thick after watering a few minutes. This is the point where water is absorbed.

As Cattleyas and Dendrobiums finish flowering keep them on the dry side. That means watering less and keeping lots of air moving around them. It is OK for the bulbs to shrivel a little over winter, but not to the point where leaves shrivel. Do not apply the same process to miniature Cattleyas as they do not need a rest period and do not appreciate drying out.

Orchids in Winter

December 2001

by Dr. Courtney Hackney, hackneau@comcast.net

Orchid Growing Tips

Some Paphs need attention this time of year, namely the smallish Brachys and Parvis. Give them a little more light and a little less water to avoid rots. While they do not have pseudobulbs, they store water in their thickened leaves, so watch for leaf shriveling as an indication that they have dried more than need be. If you do this, plants will have good root systems and can quickly soak up water when you next water them.

Phalaenopsis spikes should be staked if that has not been done yet. If spikes tend to go in another direction besides up, it will be necessary to straighten them so that the spike is vertical. It may be impossible to straighten the base of the spike, but a longer piece of tie wire attached to the base of the stake will secure the lower part of the spike as the upper portion is pulled closer to the stake. Do not tie spikes tightly against the stake until the spike is mature and the first bud has opened. At this time the spike will not lengthen and the spike can be firmly secured to the stake. For standard Phals, the last tie should be just above either the last node before the first flower or just above the second node before the first flower depending on your preference. There are also those that prefer to tie the entire spike upright, although this is not looked upon favorably by AOS judges.

Once Phals have set spikes they need a minimum of 65 ºF at night to avoid rots. Keep lots of air moving around both leaves and flowers to avoid those tiny spots from Botrytis that destroy flowers. Flowers should be clearly moving to avoid this problem. Remove dead flowers and other decaying materials from benches to limit the number of Botrytis spores.