St. Augustine Orchid Society
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Try New Things

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Orchid Growing Tips

People are always looking for better (and cheaper) ways of doing things and growing orchids is no exception. There are always companies selling new fertilizers, potting media, pots, etc that are quickly snatched up by hobbyists. While commercial growers are less prone to trying new things, they succumb as well. Occasionally, some new product or technique comes along that dramatically improves orchid culture, especially for certain genera. Often, it is a relatively simple idea or product. The realization that Phragmipediums, Bulbophyllums, and Dendrochilums require lots of water is largely responsible for the increasing numbers of these genera on show tables. New pots and media specifically for these water loving genera quickly followed.

On occasion, there are old methods that are suddenly rediscovered or used in a different way that dramatically improve culture. Recently, I saw an extremely well grown plant of Psychopsis (Onc papilio) at Carter & Holmes. It was hanging and growing on a tight ball of coconut fiber. Gene Crocker noted that this was the preferred way of growing this species in South America. Many years ago in South Florida I saw a greenhouse wall covered with Psychopsis papilio. They were mounted on coconuts husks cut in half. This is the same material now used to make coconut chips. This reputedly hard to grow species grew like weeds with this technique and never had to be repotted.

There was a time when many orchids imported from Hawaii would have pieces of lava rock still attached to their roots. They were shipped bare root because the lava rock in which they were grown was expensive to ship. Today, lava rock is available everywhere as a landscaping material, but few hobbyists use this medium. Cattleyas, Vandas, and even Phalaenopsis grow well in lava rock. The major problem is that it holds too much water for some genera. Some Florida growers mix lava rock with the puffed clay material sold as Aliflor to increase drainage. The ratio of each depends on the degree of drainage desired and the type of pots used, i.e. plastic or clay.

My experience with growing most Phal species with lava rock in clay pots has been very positive, with the big rewards coming in the future because these plants will not have to be repotted. Lava rock and these other nonorganic materials do not degrade.

Recently a beautifully grown plant of a Cycnoches hybrid came to our local show table grown totally in Aliflor. The grower, Ken Spackman, noted that this was the best the plant had ever grown and how easy it was to reduce water to the plant in winter without the need to repot and dry the roots. Aliflor does not hold water. Another rock product that does not hold water is StaLite, a product made in North Carolina by heating small pieces of shale until it expands. It is very inexpensive and used for roadbeds. For years I have grown Epidendrums and Encyclias in 100% StaLite with excellent results. The biggest problem is buying small quantities, as it is sold by the dump truck load. During a recent visit to Carter & Holmes Nursery in Newberry, SC, I saw Renanthera hybrids growing extremely well in StaLite mixed with a little redwood bark and tree fern in plastic pots. The difference in growth between this medium and a fir bark mix was remarkable.

Recently a fertilizer, once widely used, was advertised as excellent for orchids. This old (new) product is made from seaweed. Products coming from the ocean are sure to contain

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lots of micronutrients, but can also contain large quantities of salt. Overuse and quality control problems caused this product to lose favor among orchid growers years ago. Excellent flushing once a month can solve the salt problem and the new product seems to be very consistent. Forgotten, was the fact that besides micronutrients, many seaweed extracts contain small quantities of plant hormones, which stimulate new growths on orchids. This is especially important to sympodial types of orchids, such as cattleyas, but this fertilizer can also stimulate the production of keikis in vandas and phals.

If you are like most orchid hobbyists, you will try something new this year. When you do, try it only on a small number of plants and use on both those orchids growing well and those not doing well under your current culture. Keep good records and note how your orchids respond. Often it takes one or two modifications to get a new technique or product adjusted for your growing conditions. Constant experimentation and evaluation, especially with groups of orchids or individual plants that are not responding to your current culture is what makes good orchid growers better.