



St. Augustine Orchid Society

www.staugorchidsociety.org

Bringing Home New Orchids

by Sue Bottom, sbottom15@bellsouth.net



Dreaming about what you might find at an orchid show?

I love bringing home new orchids. Sometimes I buy large plants in bloom but more often than not I bring home seedlings that I can watch grow up and bloom for me the first time.

Selecting Blooming Plants.

You buy plants for any number of reasons; because you like the flower, you like the plant growth habit or you like the parentage and have great hopes for the future flower. If you are buying a plant in bloom, be sure to look beyond that gorgeous flower and take a careful look at the plant itself.

Healthy Root System. You know a healthy root system is the key to a plant that will bloom well for you. Any plant you buy should be fully established in the pot.

Pick it up by its vegetation and the pot should lift with the plant. If the plant is wobbly in the pot, it is either newly repotted and thus not established or there is a problem with the roots and you will have to nurse it back to health.



Orchid Society shows and festivals are great opportunities to shop for orchids.

Fat and Happy Bulbs and Canes. You'll get the best blooms from plants that are vigorous growers. Look at the pseudobulbs or canes to see if they are plump, hard and full. If the bulbs are shriveled or wrinkled, the plant could be dehydrated from root problems or suffering from a disease like fusarium.



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Turgid and Unmarked Leaves. Leaves should be full and hold themselves upright. Fleshy leaved phal leaves should be thick and turgid, with no droopiness or other sign of dehydration. Mature cattleya leaves should be hard with the texture of cardboard. Thin leaved orchids like the Oncidiinae should be unwrinkled. The leaves should be a healthy green with no markings, except possibly for the reddish pigmentation that happens when orchids are grown in very bright light. Yellow, brown or black markings or edges may be indicative of a bacterial or fungal disease. Do not be overly concerned if there is an occasional blemish on the plant if it otherwise looks happy and healthy.

Absence of Pests and Diseases. You want a plant this is pest free. Check the base of the plant, in leaf axils and other hidden spots and make sure there are no scale, mealybugs or other crawling insects present. A diseased orchid may have yellow or black spotting, shriveling, soft spots, etc., all of which should flash a warning sign to you when you are selecting a plant to bring home. If in flower, make sure there is no color break in the flower that can be a sign of virus.



If you're selecting seedlings from a tray of similar seedlings, choose for vigor, the biggest bulb, the widest and thickest leaf, etc. Then ask the orchid grower which one he thinks you should choose and why.

Seedlings and Near Blooming Size Plants. Seedlings are fun to bring home because you can spend hours imagining what the bloom might look like when it finally opens. If you are



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selecting a plant from a seedling tray, look for the one with the thickest bulbs and leaves. I often ask the orchid grower which seedling he would select and why, you'll get lots of interesting insights. One grower said to choose a plant that had not yet bloomed, under the assumption that if it had bloomed and had a great flower, that plant would no longer be for sale.



Don't bring scale or other problems home to your growing area

Bring New Plants Home. If you grow cattleyas, scale is your arch nemesis. After many years of battling scale, the growth inhibitor Distance (it isn't cheap!) finally allowed me to declare the greenhouse a scale free zone. Imagine my surprise when I noticed scale emerging on some of the new plants I brought home. They appeared clean when I selected them, but several months later I noticed the tell tale chlorotic spotting and white patches. Clearly scale was lurking under the rhizome or

paper sheathing of my new plants.

The books all tell you to isolate plants for several months when you bring them into your growing area so you can catch problems without spreading them to the rest of your collection. I find I can't resist the urge to group plants together as soon as I bring them home, new phals with old phals, new cattleyas with old cattleyas, etc. so the plants all get the proper light and water. I obviously needed a better plan for handling new orchids.

Apply a Protective Drench. Once you get home and before you introduce your new plant to the growing area, apply a protective drench through the potting media. There are a variety of pesticides that contain the active ingredient imidacloprid, a systemic insecticide that can be introduced to the plant via the roots and absorbed throughout the plant. It will kill scale, mealybugs, etc. from the inside out without your having to spray it on leaf surfaces like you would a contact pesticide. There are granular formulations containing 0.5% Imidacloprid that can just be sprinkled on top of the pot, sold as Generic Merit, Grubs Away, etc. There are also liquid imidacloprid-bearing pesticides that come in a wide variety of strengths. The Bayer Three in One product also contains a systemic miticide for residual control of spider mites as well as a systemic fungicide although this particular fungicide may not offer much protection against common orchid diseases. There are better protective fungicidal drenches, like Banrot or Subdue, available from specialty horticultural outlets albeit at a fairly expensive price.

Repot into Your Mix of Choice. If you bought a plant in bloom, let it bloom out and then repot it in your mix of choice. If it's a seedling orchid, you may want to repot immediately



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upon bringing it home. This way you won't have a hodgepodge of plants in sphagnum, bark and whatever else that all require watering at a different frequency. The only caveats are try not to repot in the fall when plants are going into their winter rest and be careful not to repot bifoliate cattleyas unless you see the initiation of new root growth. It is best to repot when new roots are just beginning to emerge because the plant will reestablish the most quickly when it is in a period of active root growth.



A new orchid should be a welcome addition to your collection, not a problem waiting to happen. Develop a system to make sure that your new beauty will live to bloom again along with all your old favorites.

After you find an orchid that you just can't live without, take a moment to inspect the plant to make sure it is healthy so you'll still love it in the morning.