

WINTER

There is much in bud and in flower at this time of year and for many of us we are busy staking spikes and making sure pests do not make a meal of all your hard work. It is a good time to prepare for the potting season, you will be glad you took the time later on in the year as the seasons turn. I like to have my bench organized, the pots sorted out and my mixes ready, because I grow a wide range orchids I need at least three different mixes so I try to have at least one large garbage bin fill for each mix and plenty of ingredients on standby. If you are into recycling pots, and many small growers do and I see nothing wrong with this if you know the previous plant was healthy.

Find a nice sunny spot away from those winter winds and give them a good wash, wear gloves to protect your hands and use a good household bleach and I use a brush for cleaning saucepans and the like as it has a long handle and is shaped to get into those tight corners. If you have even the faintest suspicion as to the health of the plant destroy the pot and the plant, never take a risk for the sake of a dollar.

The world is full of orchid growers who are not content to try and grow varieties that come from similar climates to the one in which they live but try to grow plants that come from locations with climates that are vastly different. We all love showy flowers, many of these plants require artificial heat in all areas away from the tropics. Living as I do in a climate that would best be described as moderate to cold I learnt long ago to leave Phalaenopsis and tropical Dendrobiums in the nurseries and spend my money on more appropriate choices.

AUSTRALIAN NATIVES

There are many terrestrials in all shapes, sizes and colours to be seen now and in fact this is an excellent time of year to visit Western Australia to see it in all its beauty, including masses of ground orchids. Why not go for a walk through the forest next weekend and checkout all the damp, mossy shady spots and see what delights you can find, but leave your digger at home in the shed. Many ground orchids are notoriously hard to grow and they are best left doing their own thing in the bush for everyone to admire. Most are deciduous and it takes a dedicated grower to have pots of bare earth for months over summer.

This time of year is when our Australian Dendrobiums start to form their racemes so that spring is filled with the delights of mass coloured displays and the heady perfume they produce. It is important to note these little flower spikes early in their development so as to avoid them being damaged, making sure they don't become caught up in the growths and leaves of the plant, it is important that they be freed early so that they develop in a straight upward manner. You may need to rotate the pot occasionally for them to best catch the sunlight. Continue to clean up your pots removing ferns and weeds and reduce competition for moisture and nutrients and dead leaves and bulbs so they do not harbour pests such as mites, slugs and woolly aphids who will readily dine on young, tender growths and flower spikes.

Cut back on watering at this time of year, as most plants are not very active except for those plants mounted on bark, cork and tree fern slabs. Always water in the morning so that the potting media absorbs it before the chill of evening sends shockwaves through the fernery and frosts can burn off tender growths and spikes and even cause fatalities. Other than liquid seaweed I do not fertilize in winter, I let what rain we have freshen up my plants and flush out the traces of the food you have applied over spring and summer.

CATTLEYS

With shorter days at this time of year ensure your plants are receiving as much light as possible to avoid long, spindly growths and give monthly applications of a liquid seaweed and fish emulsion to encourage root development and more solid growths and lessen the danger of damage from the cold, a monthly application in the warmer months works just as well to help reduce heat stress. Be on the lookout for slugs and the tiny garlic snail when moving your pots around, both pests can come with bark and be introduced into your collection. I encountered a family of greenhead ants in one of my bags and I was just as nonplussed about the encounter as they were. Some plants will be in flower so look for signs of insects and slugs and take control before these pests can undo all your hard work over the past season.

CYMBIDIUMS

Anyone who grows these magnificent plants should now be starting to feel their excitement building as many plants would have already flowered but the best should be yet to come. Continue to adjust supports for spikes and make sure if the plant needs rotating to keep the spike developing in a straight, upright manner and that back bulbs are kept clean with the husks removed so as they do not provide hiding places for pests and dead leaves, I also remove the sheaths up along the spike for the same reason.

Plants do not need to be soaking wet but do not want to be bone dry either so a weekly drink should be sufficient. If your area is prone to frosts it may be an idea to spray with Envy to prevent damage although I always say if you are using liquid seaweed product regularly helps strengthen plant cells and this should help.

If the winter appears to be a wet one it may also be good idea to drench plants with an anti rot product to help control bulb and root rot.

DENDROBIUMS

Soft cane Dendrobiums should be starting to indicate bud development with swelling along the nodes. They need as much light as possible at this time of year and many growers hang them from the clothesline. Tidy up plants removing dead canes and leaves and old leafless canes can also be removed and if pegged down on a bed of potting mix and you may new plantlets developing at each of the nodes.

Hard cane Dendrobiums are resting at this time and should only be watered when mix is dry.

ONCIDIUMS

These are having a light rest at this time of year although they are still growing so a fortnightly feed is the way to go and keep pots clean and tidy. Be ready to repot in early spring.

PHAPHIOPEDILUM

Most hybrids are in flower now with the whites and greens already open and possibly some of the coloured forms as well, with so many crossings these days parentage is somewhat blurred and harder to really predict however those with spotted blooms will not develop fully before spring arrives.

I rarely water in winter unless we have a prolonged dry spell. When watering do so first thing in the morning on a nice sunny day. Fertilize once a month with a weak solution of liquid seaweed and fish emulsion.

As flower stems develop keep them staked so as to train them in an upright position so that the flower looks you in the face or if showing they greet the judges rather than appear shy with them facing the floor.

Increased lighting is most important at this time to increase the depth of colour and larger blooms and longer stems.

Unless a plant looks tired leave repotting until mid-spring, if the plant is unwell repot immediately And if the roots have rotted away soak in a fungicide and repot staking the plant so that it is supported until it becomes established.

PHALAENOPSIS

Winter has certainly arrived and any memory of an "Indian summer" have long since faded and if you have not yet found the warmest, sunniest position for Phalaenopsis, so will they. Time now for the annual pilgrimage to the bank for that credit extension to pay for the increased electricity bill for heating. Turn the heater up at night and try to make sure that the daytime temperature is higher than that of the night. The warmer the conditions - the better the flowering.

Now is the time to give your plants a dose of magnesium, this will keep your plants in good health over winter and give them that leap into spring when it finally arrives. It will also encourage the development of new flower spikes.

Firstly stop all other applications of nutrients and after a week make up a mix of 130 grams of magnesium sulphate to 100 litres of water and apply three or four times a week apart early in the season and then you can resume your normal fertiliser programme and keep plants just damp, never over water.

Two problems can occur during winter, the first is a visit by mealy bugs and I would treat this with a spray of white oil or Eco Oil making sure to keep it well away from any buds as it may cause marking and the second problem is fungal spots on the foliage and this needs immediate treatment of Hysan at the recommended rate.

VANDACEOUS

Reduce watering now to no more than twice a week and even less if rain occurs and avoid watering altogether if the weather is bleak or cold and water only at about mid-morning, once the sun is well up and there is a little warmth in the air. Reduce fertilising now to once a fortnight.

Fungal problems may occur at this time of year and perhaps a bi-monthly spray of an environmentally safe product such as wettable sulphur may be in order, and be vigilant for mealy bug, red spider and the false spider and spray with pyrethrum.

Lighting is important and Ascocendas and strap leaf Vandas require 50% shade and others such as terete and semi-terete Vandas, Arandas, Mokaras and the like can now be placed in full sun as long as they are safe from frost, remember in the wild they grow at the top of the trees in the rain forest. In closing there are many species of orchid I have not touched on at this time, many requiring particular conditions for success and time and error is often sadly the best method and of course talking to successful growers as these days most growers are willing to part with their knowledge.

Please note that neither Bribie Island Orchid Society nor the writer take any responsibility for any recommendations given or expressed, they should be used as a guide and adjusted to your own local conditions.

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