

## Tools, Tips & Tricks

Here are a few random tips & tricks, which I have learned over 52 years of working with orchids and other plants. In no particular order:

### Getting Orchids out of the old pot

- In most cases, if you turn the plant upside down, and tap the edge of the pot sharply against the edge of your potting table, the plant will pop right out.
  - ◆ Make sure to tap the side of the pot, where there are no new growths.
  - ◆ Keep your fingertips across pot contents, so the plant doesn't fall to the floor upside down, when it pops free.
- If the plant has sent roots over the edge everywhere, and is holding the pot in an iron grip, you may have no choice but to break the old pot.
  - ◆ Bring out the hammer for clay pots.
  - ◆ Use a razor blade to score the outside of a plastic pot. Then you can break it apart with your fingers.
  - ◆ Also see tip under Greenhouse Tools.



- Sometimes, a plant is trying to crawl out of the pot at a time, when you really don't want to repot.

For *C. amethystoglossa*



and its progeny, you can't repot, unless the new growth is sending out roots. If the mix is reasonably fresh - don't, just 'double up'. Place the plant, still in the original pot, inside a significantly larger pot, and fill the new growing space with more mix.

There was good reason not to disturb this plant, as it was pushing buds through the sheaths on both of the mature growths.



### Potting Mix

Most orchids can be grown in almost any of the common media. What is critical, is that you determine which medium works with your watering schedule.

If you live in an apartment with 15% relative humidity, then trying to grow all your orchids on sticks (mounts) is not a realistic option. I would recommend growing in near pure sphagnum in that environment.

While many growers recommend potting 'sticks' to tamp down the medium, I have never done so. Fingertip tight is fine, as long as the orchid has adequate roots. If it does not, then a rhizome clip to stabilize the plant in the new pot is strongly recommended (*wobbly plants do not grow well*). I usually bend the rhizome clip, so it fits snugly over the rhizome.



### Plant labels

Having a name in the pot is of no importance to the plant. However, if you would like to bring it to a society show table, it would be nice to have a name. And, if you plan to let the society use the plant in a show, then having the correct name is important.

- To avoid faded labels, use either a **pencil**, or a paint pen (available in art supply stores). I use **paint pens** in several colors, reserving red for clonal names.



- To avoid lost labels, write two for every plant, and push one all the way into the pot. If the visible label is broken or lost (pulled out by a kid or a thoughtless visitor), the one inside the pot allows you to recover the name.

On occasion you will find half a label in a pot. If the part of the name that you can read is reasonably unique, you can probably still find the rest via the RHS database, which can be found here:

<http://apps.rhs.org.uk/horticulturaldatabase/orchidregister/orchidregister.asp>

Scroll past 'Parentage Search', to get to 'Grex Name Search'. In the first field, type % (= wild card in this database); in the second field type however much you have of the grex name.

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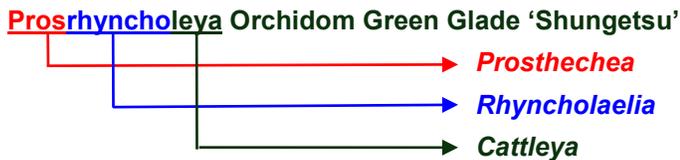
In this case, typing in 'ebbie de mello', the database returns a single hit, so this plant is actually *Zygopetalum Debbie De Mello*. We can then check the AOS awards database, and find that there is only one AM/AOS awarded to this grex, so the full identify of this plant is:



Many nurseries still use orchid genera, which have become defunct due to taxonomic changes. This is particularly common in the *Cattleya* and *Oncidium* groups. We can use the same search function to verify the current genus of each hybrid.

In the *Cattleya* group, we know that both *Potinara* and *Yamadaara* are obsolete. When the genus name includes 'Brasso', it is less clear, as *digbyana* & *glauca* now are *Rhyncholaelias*, while *nodosa* and many other species remain in *Brassavola*.

When repotting a *Yam. Orchidom Green Glade 'Shungetsu' AM/AOS*, I decided to check the name. The RHS database revealed the current name:



### Potting Table/Greenhouse Tools

The three most important tools, which I carry around in the greenhouse are:

#### Tweezers

It can be very difficult to reach small weeds growing in between pseudobulbs. These tweezers can reach, where your fingers cannot. And, this tool is invaluable if you have to weed agaves, cactus or other thorny plants.



#### Needlenose Pliers

I use these not only for cutting and bending metal wire, but also for pulling stubborn tufts of grass, which the tweezers are unable to pull out of the pot.



#### Single Edge Razor Blades

To avoid spreading virus from plant to plant, I do not use knives or scissors for trimming or cutting. I only use razor blades, and each blade is used only once.

Another tool, which I use primarily in the garden, is the: **Japanese Garden Trowel**



When I can't get a plant out of a plastic pot, I use this tool to give the pot a hard tap with the sharp edge. This breaks the pot, without getting into contact with the roots (thus avoiding the need to sterilize the tool).



On occasion I use this tool to divide large *Cymbidium*. I jam (hammer) it down the center of the plant from the top, and pry the two halves apart. This is much easier than trying to separate the plant from the bottom, where the roots are in the way. After such use, I disinfect the trowel in pure bleach.

### Hanging Pots

We all need more growing space, so it is common to hang pots from the overhead, whether in a greenhouse or in a window. There are several ways to do this:

#### HD Wire Hangers

These grip the rim of clay pots. They come in both single and double versions. While easy to use, they are fairly expensive, and I have seen them let go of large pots (8" & 10"), as these get heavy when freshly watered.

*Since they are in contact with the roots inside the pot, they must be sterilized before they can be used again.*

I do not use these much. When I do, I soak them in bleach before re-using.



**Plain Wire Hangers**

These are readily available in garden centers (used for hanging baskets). There are two ways they can be used:

**Plastic Pots:**

Simply drill 3 holes and thread the hangers through the holes. The holes should be drilled either through the rim edge, or just below the rim. Twist the ends around the hanger, and you are all set.



**Clay Pots, 5"-10" sizes**

Using a diamond tip drill bit (2 mm), I drill 3 holes through the rim in a water bath. You have to be a little careful, that the drill does not hit the rim hard when the bit breaks through to the inside.



When wire hanger ends are threaded through and folded over, this pot will never fall down.

*While there is little contact between roots & wire hanger, I do recommend sterilizing the ends of the wire hanger before using again.*

**Clay Pots, 4" & 4½" sizes**

These have a thinner rim. When the drill bit goes through, the drill invariably hits the rim, and 3 times out of 4, the pot cracks.

While not quite as secure, a better way is to tie a 16 gauge steel wire around the pot, just under the rim. You can then wrap the ends of the wire hanger around the steel wire ring. With this method, there should be no need to sterilize wire hangers before re-use. If you do not want to mess with a drill & water bath, you can do this for the larger pots as well.



**Sterilizing Clay Pots**

I clean them of debris & old roots with a brush, using plain water, and let them dry. Then I bake them in the oven at 425°F for a couple of hours. This eliminates the need to rinse to get rid of detergent & bleach.

**Sterilizing Plastic Pots**

I soak them in buckets for a week, using bleach & water in 1:10 ratio. Then I scrub them clean in plain water, using a brush with stiff bristles

**Sterilizing Wire Hangers & Rhizome Clips**

I place them in a jar with undiluted bleach for about 1/2 hour. I rinse them with plain water, and they are good to go.

**When you need an 'oval' pot**

Some of the most 'annoying' orchids, are those which stretch considerably from growth to growth, and march forward in a more or less straight line. For small plants in 3"-5" pots, this is tolerable. However, when the choice is between a 6" pot, and either 8" or 10":

- You see a marked increase in the volume of potting material required.
- It becomes more difficult to control the moisture level in the pot.
- It takes up too much valuable bench space.

Here is how I handled a 'problem' *Prosthechea prismatocarpa*:

I took an 8" plastic pot, and drilled two sets of holes in the inside rim, on opposite sides. Then, I put the plant into the empty pot, pulled a piece of galvanized 16 gauge steel wire\*\* through the holes, so I got a double cross-over, **above** the rhizome of the plant. I pulled the sides together, forcing the pot into an oval shape, and then I twisted the steel wire on the outside of the pot to maintain the oval shape.

Finally, I added Cattleya mix while holding the plant tight against the cross-over (which now doubles as the rhizome clip). The end result is a pot that hopefully can hold two years worth of growth.

