

D & B ORCHIDS
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Orchid Potting Material

By Dotty Woodson, Horticulture County Extension Agent – Texas Cooperative Extension

Every orchid grower has their favorite formula for potting media. There are as many different media formulas as there are growers. Keep one thing in mind, it is not necessarily what the orchid is potted in but how the plant is managed once it is potted. Many orchid growers will try different media looking for that perfect formula. It takes at least one growing season to test a media unless it is an immediate disaster by holding too much water. The number one killer of orchids is too much water.

Every greenhouse and growing area has different growing conditions (air flow, humidity, light, temperature). These conditions not only influence the genus of orchids you can grow but the type of media you should use. Other influencing factors are time, number of orchids, cost, availability, ability to retain its good qualities for at least a year and water.

Orchids require a coarse potting material which allows good air circulation and quick drainage. Orchid roots do not require a moist media like fibrous rooted houseplants. Orchid roots need a good thorough soaking, not sips of water. Orchid roots are covered with a spongy tissue (velamen) that protects roots from dry air, helps absorb water and nitrogen from the air and helps epiphytic orchids cling to trees and rocks. The velamen is normally silver-white, round and plump. The tips are glossy green or reddish and pointed. The velamen will turn green as water is absorbed. Several hours after watering, the velamen will turn white again.

Common medium for orchids is fir bark, tree fern, osmunda fern, sphagnum moss, lava rock, perlite, charcoal, cork nuggets, rock wool, styrofoam, pumice, peat moss potting mixes, baked clay, kenaf, coconut fiber, cypress fiber, red wood fiber and very combination of the above products. Each of these products have different water holding capacity and cation exchange capacity which will influence your management once the orchid is potted. A good starting point is to talk to other orchid growers who grow similar genus and under similar conditions to yours. Growing conditions like humidity will influence how often to

water and therefore how fast the media breaks down. Different genus will require different medium. Growers who are heavy waterers need a media that dries out quickly. Growers who water only when time allows need a media that will hold moisture longer.

Many of the products come in different size particles. Small, medium and coarse are the usual sizes. Fine orchid bark is great for seedlings. It breaks down quickly but seedlings should be repotted yearly. Cattleya and other large sympodial orchids need a growing media that will last several years. Large fir bark is the most popular. As the bark breaks down, the interval between watering becomes longer. The baked clay product sold to hydroponic growers is becoming very popular. If you are a heavy waterer, check out this product. The nooks and crannies hold water even though it looks dry. Monopodial orchids like Phalaenopsis will remain in the same pot for years if the media does not break down and hold too much water. Choose a charcoal-perlite (medium size) mix, peat mix, sphagnum, rock wool or medium fir bark for monopodial orchids if you are not a heavy waterer. Choose tree fern, pumice, baked clay, lava rock or cork nuggets if you have a tendency to over water. Tree fern chunks and large charcoal are popular for Vanda orchids grown in baskets or clay pots.

Berry and I have been growing orchids since 1973 and we are still looking for the perfect media. The answer to the question, What is the best orchid potting media? is: use the media that works for that orchid under your growing conditions. Try different medium until you find the one that works for you and then stick with it.

Fort Worth Orchid Society
<http://fworchidsociety.com/>

The Fort Worth Orchid Society meets the first Monday of each month at the Fort Worth Botanic Garden at 7:00 pm. Guests are welcomed.

Orchid Supplies and Potting Material

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