Cultivation Notes
by Peter Haeusler

With temperatures easing it’s a good time to get out and take care of those pressing tasks that you may have been putting off due to the heat!

Watering

It’s been a dry summer so no doubt you have been watering your plants more frequently than in an average year. Do not over-water as this can encourage fungal activity. But equally, be careful not to let your pots dry out as potting mixes can then become hydrophobic. In such cases you may believe that you are watering your plants, but in reality, it is running straight through the pots. As such the water is not properly moistening the potting mix, and as a result is not being taken up by the plant. It may be the case, for instance, that a smaller plant is being over-shadowed by larger ones and not receiving the water which you think it is.

Often, simply the act of picking up the pot with one hand (i.e. feeling if it has some weight) will give you a good idea as to whether the water is being retained to a reasonable degree. If I feel that a pot is not holding water I will sit it in a saucer and water it, letting it stand in the excess water until I can see that the water is being absorbed. Sometimes, especially in the case of smaller pots (say 100mm), I will de-pot the plant and stand it in a Seasol solution (fully covering the roots) for an hour or even overnight. It is amazing how quite shriveled roots will re-charge and swell. Then I re-pot the plant in fresh mix.

Re-potting & potting up

I find that I can re-pot Clivias throughout the summer, and don’t believe that I’ve ever lost so much as a seedling even when potting up on hot days! However, spring and autumn are the premium times for these tasks (I don’t divide or pot up plants in winter). So, if you have potting that needs to be done then throw yourself into the task now! While the weather remains, warm plants will respond well to the combination of fresh potting mix and fertiliser. I use slow release Osmocote Exact (8-9 mth) which includes vital trace elements. Freshly repotted plants are watered thoroughly with a solution comprising equal parts Seasol and Powerfeed (about 30ml in total/9 litre watering can).

You might also want to divide some of your plants, whether because a clump has become too big or you want to hive off an offset or two. A common mistake with offsets is to remove them when they are relatively immature, which can set the offset back or even result in its loss. I like to have offsets at a semi-mature stage (at least 8 leaves and a reasonable mass of roots) before removing them. When dividing a plant, I spray the cut surface (i.e. the point at which the offset has been separated from the main plant) with a pruning and grafting compound called Steri-prune (available as a pressure pack from Bunnings). This seals the cut surface and helps prevent rot setting in.

Berries

If you did some pollinating last season you will have noticed that where you had clusters of flowers last spring you now have clusters of enlarged berries seemingly almost bursting with developing seeds. Do take care to stake these spikes otherwise you may find them bending to the point of breaking under the weight of the berries! I use a heavier cane stake to that which I commonly use to stabilise flower spikes, often securing them at a couple of points up close to the cluster of berries.
It is also important to keep litter out from among the berries as this can harbor caterpillars and mealybugs. If you haven’t already done so remove the (by now) dry bracts from below the berries (these bracts had originally encased the flower buds or inflorescence and attach at the point where the pedicels join the peduncle). These spent bracts seem to make particularly attractive havens for pests.

**Mealybugs**

Surely these are the scourge of *Clivia* enthusiasts! I thought it was going to be a mealybug-lite season, but the last few weeks have seen numbers grow significantly. However, some *Clivias* must taste better than others, as each summer I find that mealybugs love to congregate in numbers on particular plants. Conversely, there are plants, even if they are next to these popular ones, that rarely see a mealybug! And from my experience, *Clivia* species like *mirabilis*, *nobilis* and *caulescens* are less attractive propositions for mealybugs. The first two species do of course have much tougher and narrower leaves. I have been pleasantly surprised, however, to find that my tubs of mature *caulescens* plants remain relatively free of mealybugs.

In terms of 'control' measures, every grower seems to have his or her preference and I am not going to canvass the many options here. My preference has been to use a systemic insecticide like Confidor. Given the rather waxy surface on *Clivia* leaves, Confidor must be applied with a surfactant to help its absorption into the plant. But you must be so careful when applying insecticides like this (and there are far more potent ones), in terms of your own health and that of family members and pets, as well as likely harm to beneficial insects. Some of the new generation of insecticides (I am currently trialing one) are designed not to harm bees and various other beneficial insects. The other thing I would emphasise when it comes to pest management is the need to rotate whatever chemicals you may use to help prevent the build-up of resistance among pests to particular insecticides.

To reduce the reliance on insecticides I do employ a safe all-purpose cleaning solution which I find very effective in cleaning up infected plants and helping keep mealybugs at bay. I have used it for some years now and have never seen any sign of damage from its use when it comes to very young plants and/or tender new leaves. The recipe is as follows:

- 1 litre water;
- 200ml vinegar;
- 40ml detergent;
- 40ml eucalyptus oil; and,
- 2 dessertspoons washing soda.

Mix all ingredients together (the solution can be stored for long periods in screw topped container). Use at the rate of 60ml to about four litres of warm water (make it stronger if you wish). The solution can be applied by spray bottle, using a cloth to wipe leaves and a soft tapered brush dipped in the solution to get down into those leaf folds.