

Garden Sages/Marge Hols

Repot orchids for re-bloom

My niece, Laura Hols, called from Spokane the other day to ask how to repot her first orchid, a gift from a friend. She also asked how to coax it to re-bloom. From Laura's description—"thick, dark-green leaves like tongues and thick, silvery roots growing out of the pot"—I surmised she had a *Phalaenopsis* hybrid, the moth orchid.

Everything I know about repotting orchids I learned from Bob Martin, who built the awesome orchid collection at the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory before retiring to Hawaii. While I was writing for the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Bob gave me a hands-on lesson.

The first rule is, don't try to grow an orchid in regular potting soil or you'll kill it. Some orchid mixes I've tried have so much soil they stay too wet. I buy Fafard Orchid Potting Mix (at Leitner's), which contains medium-sized chunks of bark, coir and Perlite. You can use the mix as is; but, following Martin's lead, I "doctor" it with horticultural charcoal and small pieces of rock wool.

To repot a *Phalaenopsis* orchid, ease it out of its pot, clean off all the old planting media and examine the root system for damage. Cut back any soft, rotting root tissue to firm tissue, using a sterilized scissors or bypass pruner. Healthy *Phalaenopsis* roots have green tips to absorb nutrients. The firm, silvery vellum part of the roots absorbs water to keep the plant turgid.

Repot the orchid in a 6-1/2-inch plastic azalea pot with lots of drainage holes.



Use a larger pot only if the orchid is so large it wouldn't be stable. Soak the pot in 1 part bleach, 9 parts water for 20 minutes before planting.

An inch of horticultural charcoal in the bottom of the pot will discourage bacterial growth. Position a *Phalaenopsis* orchid with its old growth against one side of the pot, not in the middle, to allow room for growth. If aerial roots are pliable, push them down gently and bend them under and around into the pot without breaking them. Roots don't have to be spread out. Hold the orchid in place and add new media, using a chopstick or pencil to work it in around the roots. Water thoroughly and let water run out of the drainage holes. Pour any water off the orchid's crown. Note the repotting date on the plant tag.

***Phalaenopsis* orchids re-bloom reliably**, unlike some other orchids I grow (I have a 10-year-old *Dendrobium* that has *never* bloomed—should I give up?). Repot annually. Provide a lot of light, but not direct sun. I use florescent shop lights set for 16 hours a day, and keep a fan running on the same timer. I water weekly, or every 5 days for small plants. I use distilled water, which I "cook" in a 1-gallon electric still my husband gave me for Christmas. Who needs diamonds?