

Let's Talk Gardening

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Tom Harris, Ph. D.

The Country Gardener

Orchids

Boy, did I learn something today. I stopped by the Hill Country Nursery to get some new soil for the orchids I bought my wife for Christmas last year. I met my friend Jack Gerhart there and he took me to talk to the “orchid lady” who works in that greenhouse in the back. I didn't really catch her name, but I think it was Lynn. Anyway, she told me more about orchids in about 10 minutes than all the reading I've done in the last 3-4 months. First of all, orchids don't grow in soil—they grow in pine bark. Actually, the plant doesn't put its roots into the bark; the bark just holds the plant in the pot and allows lots of air to move around the roots.

The next thing she did was ask me why I wanted to buy more bark for my orchids. I told her that they looked kinda crowded and, to me at least, looked like they needed to be repotted into a bigger pot with more soil. Wrong! She said that orchids like to be pot-bound and kinda crowded—especially if they're kept in the house. The only reason that orchids need to be replanted is when the bark begins to break down and starts to look like regular ol' potting soil. She said that the roots would then think they're growing in soil and wouldn't like it at all because they would stay wet all the time.

Then she told me about watering the plant I have; phalaenopsis orchids. They like to be watered once per week by soaking. After it has soaked to get the bark wet, let it drip until it stops and then add some orchid fertilizer—maybe a cupful run through the potting medium and let it drip dry, too.

On the way out, Jack also pointed out lots of orchid plants hanging in the trees outside. They have roots hanging outside the pot they're in and roots are all over the place. I didn't ask what kind of care these plants got, but they looked like they hadn't been tended in quite a while but yet they were huge. I guess I'm gonna have to make another trip over there and talk to her about those plants. I'm thinking, however, that orchids need a lot more TLC than I wanna give them. I need instant gratification.

Hey, it's time to fertilize the tomatoes and onions again. Remember it's every three weeks with either 19-5-9 slow-release lawn fertilizer or 9-1-1 organic fertilizer. If you're using Miracle Grow or Hasta Gro, you need to do it about every 7-10 days to have the same effect (but be sure to follow the directions on the label). Tomatoes take lots of fertilizer to grow, bloom and set fruit. Onions needs lots of fertilizer to grow lots of leaves on top; the more leaves on top, the more layers of onion below the ground. Unless you're eating the small onions for some reason, leave them in the ground until the tops fall over. If you feed the onions every three weeks, you oughta have some about the size of teacups by the end of the growing season—maybe even bigger.

When you go to by transplants to get some beautiful summer color, be sure to buy plants that have buds, but not blossoms. Sometimes when flowering transplants are set into the ground, they just stop blooming. No one knows for sure why, but transplant shock is the best answer you're gonna get. All good nurserymen know that color sells, but the knowledgeable gardener knows to get the plant from the bunch that only has buds. In addition, a gardener will pull a plant or two from the pot to see what condition the roots are in. If the roots are white, they're healthy. If they're any other color, put that one back and look at another. Also, if the roots seem to take up the entire pot and there is very little soil in it, put it back. There's a good chance that the roots will keep circling the plant when it's put in the ground and eventually girdle it to the point of damage or death. The exception to this MIGHT be bougainvillea. It kinda likes to be stressed so that it will bloom. Go figure

Send your ideas, questions, or comments to: gardener@gvtc.com