

## Growing the Cattleya Alliance (eg Cattleya, Laelia, Sophronitis and others, and their hybrids) - J. Brydie



unifoliate Cattleya



Rhyncholaelia (Brassavola) digbyana



Laelia anceps



Sophronitis

**General Culture :** Typically, these orchids have a distinct upright pseudobulb, stiff leathery leaves, and relatively thick roots. You can tell just by looking that they have evolved to suit an alternately wet then dry environment. In our artificial growing conditions we need to respect that fundamental requirement. The medium in which we grow them needs to be free draining, retain moisture for a time after watering, but never stay too wet. Our watering also needs to follow this wet dry cycle. Preferably, wait until the media is almost dry before re-watering.

Cattleya alliance orchids can be grown in almost any container. Most growers use either plastic pots (preferably the modern types like 'port pots' with much increased drain holes), clay pots, or slatted wooden baskets. Each has their own characteristics and advantages. Clay pots dry more quickly than plastic so watering frequency or size of medium may need to be adjusted to suit. Slatted baskets likewise.

**Temperature and light :** Some Cattleya alliance plants can be grown cold to the extent that winter temperatures down to 0°C are tolerable but others are warmer growers. To generalise, perhaps one could say that the ideal annual temperature range would around 7°C minimum to 32°C maximum. In the growing seasons, a reasonable drop between day and night temperatures is beneficial.

However, in Sydney in winter we often get wet weather at the same time it is cold, and many Cattleya alliance plants find this a lethal combination. It is recommended that they be grown under cover in winter so that they will only get water when you decided to give it. They are not actively growing in the winter months so take care to only water when they are relatively dry.

All Cattleya alliance orchids require good light and humidity. 50% shade cloth provides about the right light levels provided the basic light in your particular growing area isn't compromised by shade from tall trees or buildings. In general, lime green coloured foliage on the plant is an indication of proper light, whereas darker green foliage is indicative of the plant not getting enough light and may stop the plant reaching its full blooming potential. Yellow coloured foliage usually indicates too much light.

**Water :** Cattleya Alliance plants enjoys frequent watering during their growing period, but will not tolerate wet feet for extended periods. The frequency of watering is relative to the container, the temperature, air circulation, and the amount of water retained in the medium in the container. Watering should be done, so the roots are approaching dryness before re watering. In the warmer periods, plants can be watered several times a week without worry if the roots can dry quickly.

**Fertilizer :** Cattleya Alliance plants should be fed consistently when in full growth, which is generally all year except winter. If you apply fertiliser with your water, fertilizing every second watering will provide nearly all orchids with adequate food. This could work out to be as often as once a week in the middle of the season, or as little as once a month at other times.

There is no food value in the mediums we use. Your orchids only get the food you supply as fertiliser. Don't be stingy but make sure you don't apply it too concentrated. The best recommendation is to always apply fertiliser to all orchids at **half the strength suggested on the pack**. Make it weak and apply regularly.

**Potting :** The best time to repot is after all flowering has ceased. Hopefully, this is just before the orchid makes new roots for the coming season. If you repot just after it makes new roots, it is nearly impossible to do it without damaging the new roots and you will most likely set the plant back severely.

However, repotting can be done anytime if it is really necessary. If you have a run down plant doing badly,

you should repot it as soon as possible as it is probably sitting in wet decomposing media and will not begin to recover until it is fixed.

In all cases, a warm water soak for 10 minutes will make most roots pliable and easier to remove from the container, minimising root damage.

**Potting mediums :** Different growers use just about every type of medium it is possible to procure. The most common is probably 'orchid bark' which can be a number of different commercial forms of treated pine bark. Other commonly used materials are coconut husk chips, and peat moss/perlite mixes. The choice is a personal one and depends greatly on how the characteristics of that medium fit with you own watering and growing practices. Coconut husk chips retain more water so might suit you if you water less.

In regard to 'orchid bark' there are also many different grades in the size of the particles. For small plants a mix of chunks between about 0.5cm and 1.5cm might suit, but perhaps using a majority of the smaller size. For a mature flowering size plant, larger chunks between about 1cm and 2.5cm would be better. If you only buy a bag of one size bark, I suggest you buy 'medium' grade (about 1.5 to 2.5cm). When you need smaller chunks, cut some of it up with secateurs.

Many growers also add various amounts of polystyrene foam to aid drainage and increase air in the pot. This can either be in the form of bean bag balls or manually crumbled soft packing foam. Personally, I prefer the latter because it provides an irregular, multi size foam component. I add about 15% polystyrene.

**Growing Tips :** Examine your plants on a regular basis. Pick it up off the bench and look at it all over properly. Remove the dried sheathing from pseudobulbs to prevent build-up of moisture, and as a hiding place for scale insects. (don't try to remove the sheaths when still green, you may damage the plant)

Insects, particularly mealy bugs and scale insects, find Cattleya alliance plants attractive and can do serious damage, especially to new growth eyes. If you see them on your orchids, spray with Eco oil. If you only have a few plants you might also use an old toothbrush to scrub off the scale properly. You will need to spray several times a couple of weeks apart as scale insects lay their eggs under the females protective shield and the spray won't kill them. The second and third sprays are to get the new generations as they hatch and roam the plant.

Slugs and snails are also a problem and will especially attack new growths. Keep an eye out and use snail bait selectively and frugally. Old baits go mouldy and can become a problem if you use too much.