



The Orchid Society of W. A. (Inc.)

Cattleya Orchids

Cattleyas grow quite easily in our climate and are very rewarding with their spectacular brightly coloured blooms. The following notes are a guide on how to grow Cattleyas in Perth conditions.

POSITION

Cattleyas require less light than cymbidiums, about 70% to 80% shade (equating to 20,000 to 30,000 lux). Mature plants will grow under brighter conditions (or the same conditions as cymbidiums) if the plant is acclimatised to it slowly. Leaf colour is a good guide to light levels- if leaves are a deep dark green, they are not receiving enough light. Medium to apple green plants are receiving an ideal amount of light for flowering. Yellow green leaves, or sunburn marks are a result of excessive light. Most cattleyas will benefit from some protection from winter rain. They liked to be hung or raised off the ground, away from insects where there is plenty of air circulation. Cattleyas do appreciate humidity above 40%, and grow and flower well in the same conditions that bromeliads flower in.

TEMPERATURE

Cattleyas can be successfully grown cold, without any form of heating & still flower well. If given heat in winter (a minimum temp of about 12 °C) they will continue to grow without a winter rest. Cattleyas do not appreciate being kept cold *and* wet at the same time, and need to be protected from frosts so in winter should ideally should be grown under protection from rain eg. Solarweave, fibreglass, glass, or other protective material. Protection from rain also helps prevent damage to the flowers.

POTTING MEDIUM

In nature, Cattleyas grow on tree limbs and in the forks of limbs, so they require a very open or large, free draining potting mix. Their roots act like a sponge and hold water. If the mix is constantly wet the roots will rot and the plant may be lost. Aged pine bark nuggets from an Orchid Society or Orchid Nursery are an ideal medium, +/- additives such as perlite or charcoal. The pine bark should be larger than that used for cymbidiums, approx. 10-20 mm chunks. Fresh bark or mulch must never be used- If not weathered, toxic substances will be released, nitrogen will be robbed from the plant to break the bark down, and the plant will dry out excessively due to the new bark not holding moisture.

WATERING Rate of watering depends on numerous factors, climate, potting medium, size of plant and where it is grown. It is important that cattleyas have a wet/dry cycle- their roots will rot if kept constantly soggy. If the mixture is very open it is hard to over water the plant. Cattleyas growing in enclosed spaces need a lot of air movement so that the mix can dry out quickly. Plants require regular water when in active growths are maturing, and less when the plant is dormant. In general, in summer water once a day, in autumn and spring about every second day, and mid-winter every third day depending on the weather. In winter, if very wet and humid, watering can be delayed 4-7 days. Plants should not become so dry that the bulbs start to shrivel.

FERTILIZING

In the wild, Cattleyas obtain nutrients from bird droppings and broken-down leaf matter that falls around it. Frequent, very dilute liquid fertilizer as the new growth is maturing will help produce a healthy, robust plant. Slow-release pelleted fertilizer such as Strike Back for Orchids can be used at a rate of one teaspoon to 200 mm (8") pot. Slow-release pellets can also be mixed into the bark before potting. Avoid fertilizing in the peak of summer as heat stressed plants cannot use nutrients.

REPOTTING

Large Cattleyas should be repotted or divided when the plant has filled the pot. The ideal time to repot is when a flush of new roots is emerging, as these new roots will establish themselves in the fresh mix. For most cattleyas this occurs in Spring. It is best to avoid repotting in the heat of summer where the plants will not tolerate the stressful ordeal. Plants should be repotted into a fresh mix every 2 to 3 years otherwise the root system will deteriorate. Application of dolomite lime to the mix every year can help keep the pH of the mix from becoming too acidic. Plastic squat pots with large drainage holes are best.

DIVIDING

When dividing Cattleyas, each division should consist of 3 or more growths. When a cattleya rhizome is cut, the 'older' piece of the plant will usually send up a new growth- you can cut the rhizome with a sharp sterilised knife a few months prior to repotting to stimulate this growth, so that each piece can be repotted. Place a plant tag where the cut is made to keep the pieces separate. Cattleyas are more showy if allowed to grow into large plants.

ORCHIDS IN FLOWER

Don't open the sheaths if possible. Let the buds break through on their own. If the sheath turns yellow, then tear a small hole in the base so that excess water can drain out. If torn open at the top, water will collect in the sheath and rot the buds. Once the buds are exposed watch for pests and put snail pellets around in the pot. Spring and autumn are the two main flowering seasons. With good culture a plant may flower twice a year. Flowers normally can last 1 to 2 months and can be strongly perfumed.

DISEASES

The main pest targeting cattleyas are scales and mealy bugs, and monitoring plants for early signs of infestation is critical. Infestations can be treated with oils or systemic insecticides. Another issue is fungal infection (black rot), which is usually prevented by good air movement or ventilation. Fungicide may be applied for plants that do not have adequate ventilation. Snails and slugs love the flowers so apply moisture resistant snail pellets to the pot, especially in winter.

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