

## Skewer use for watering of orchids

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Watering is the most difficult hurdle for the new orchid grower. This one problem alone is what has given orchids the reputation of being hard to grow. The following is a method to help the beginner learn how to water. Once one gets a good feel for the watering needs of their plants, it can be dispensed with.

Get some bamboo barbeque skewers from the grocery store and stab the clean unhandled end of one into the pot down to the bottom, and for clay pots, as close to the center of the pot as is reasonable. Leave it there and when you think it is time to water, pull the skewer and look at the color to see if the skewer is drying out, then put it back, hopefully into the same hole. Never share skewers between plants, as this will transfer virus between plants. Always dedicate a skewer to a plant.

Phalaenopsis, Paphiopedilums, the Oncidium family, and potted Vandas should get very close to dry, but not completely. Cattleyas, Laelias, Brassavolas, the non-reedstemmed Epidendrums, and most Dendrobiums (while not growing as during winter) should dry out completely before watering. In a fine mix, the skewer will look dry when the mix is dry or slightly off color when ready for plants like Phals to be watered. However, in a very chunky mix, like medium bark, the skewer may dry a little before the mix does, so you might want to wait just a little longer for the 'dry before watering' plants. If in doubt, error on the dry side. If the skewer looks wet, for sure don't water.

Plants like Cymbidiums, Dendrobiums while growing and flowering, and Reedstemmed Epidendrums can be watered more freely as long as the mix drains freely and is not holding an excessive amount of water, and skewers are not needed here. Vandas without mix in a basket or pot, and Phragmipediums can and should be watered very freely.

If, after doing this, you determine that you have probably been over watering, then there would be concern for damage to the roots. It is common to pull the root ball from the pot and inspect the roots when one is concerned about this, then replace the ball into the pot. Gently squeeze the roots. If they are firm, they are OK. If they collapse, they are dead. Occasionally, a dead root gets petrified, but these are very black looking and are unlikely to be confused with living roots. Don't expect all the roots to be alive. As long as there are some living roots, the plant will be OK. If the mix falls away from the roots, you can put it all back around the roots, but you need to know that you want to press the mix in firmly so the plant can't wiggle, and try not to break roots.

After a time the skewer is likely to discolor because fungi seem to like the wood. If this happens, soak the discolored portion in 10% or higher bleach solution until the color comes back to normal. Rinse lightly and return the skewer to the pot.

Here are a few other methods of determining the moisture content of a pot, and these may be practiced at the same time as using skewers to help in the general watering education.

- 1) Lift the pot just after watering and notice the weight. The pot will be considerably lighter when it needs watering. This works well for plants in plastic pots, not so well when clay pots or rocks in the bottom of pots are used.
- 2) You can put a finger down into the pot and feel the mix, but this practice could transfer disease to the plant if you jab a root with a fingernail. I don't recommend this unless you are pretty sure there are no roots in the portion of the mix you are testing.
- 3) If you have a good nose, you can sniff the pot. After watering, you will notice a humid and almost musty smell. When this smell is almost completely gone, water.