



STRIKING CYMBIDIUM BACK-BULBS

One of the first lessons that I learnt as a young scientist was never to use jargon when writing about my work. My old professor would turn in his grave if he could read the above heading.

Can you imagine someone who had never grown an orchid previously trying to work out which was the back-bulb in a pot of cymbidiums and hitting it with a hammer! And then trying to work out why!

For the benefit of novice growers, I should explain that a back-bulb is a bulb that has lost all its leaves, hopefully because of age rather than disease. When a Cymbidium is repotted, it's desirable to remove these leafless bulbs, preferably by severing the rhizome linking them to the rest of the plant. It's best to use a sterile knife or scissors, but some growers simply twist the connecting rhizome until it breaks.

Having removed the back-bulbs, how do you 'strike' them and why? 'Striking' is jargon for encouraging the back-bulb to produce new growth from incipient leaf nodes, which are mostly located near the base of the bulb. To prepare a back-bulb for 'striking' firstly remove any old leaf husks, as these may harbour scale and other insect pests. Then, cut any residual roots back to their junction with the back-bulb and trim the break, if the bulb was removed by twisting. To minimize infection by any of the organisms responsible for rot, the cut surfaces should be sealed either with Steri-Prune (or similar sealing paste) or by leaving the bulb lying in the shade for a few days for the cut surfaces to form a scab or callus. Alternatively, the cut surfaces can be dusted with a fungicide. Leaving the back-bulbs to dry for a few days is the simplest option.

There are many different ways of striking back-bulb and if I claim that one is better than another, I am bound to be inundated with 'Letters to the Editor' (maybe that's not such a bad idea). I've used several methods for striking back-bulbs, each with a fair measure of success.

The simplest method, involving least effort, is simply to bury the back-bulb to two-thirds of its depth in the same potting medium that you use for the rest of your collection. If you use a four inch pot, then no attention will be needed for two years except regular watering and the addition of a little slow-release fertilizer in spring.

Some back-bulbs strike more rapidly than others. If a leaf growth appears within three months, you're doing well.