

SPROUTING BACKBULBS

ASK 10 ORCHID growers how to sprout backbulbs and you'll likely get a dozen answers. These include everything from the sphag-n-bag method to potting the backbulbs as you would a front division and hoping for the best.

The theory behind the sphag-n-bag method (and its corollaries) is that by keeping the backbulbs in a constantly humid environment, but not touching wet potting mix, dormant eyes will eventually break. The method varies, ranging from placing the backbulbs in Ziploc bags or large plastic pretzel jars to suspending the backbulbs in a dry cleaning bag over moist potting medium and hanging the whole affair from the bottom of a greenhouse bench (popular when I first started growing orchids in the 1960s). But they all rely on nearly 100 percent humidity.

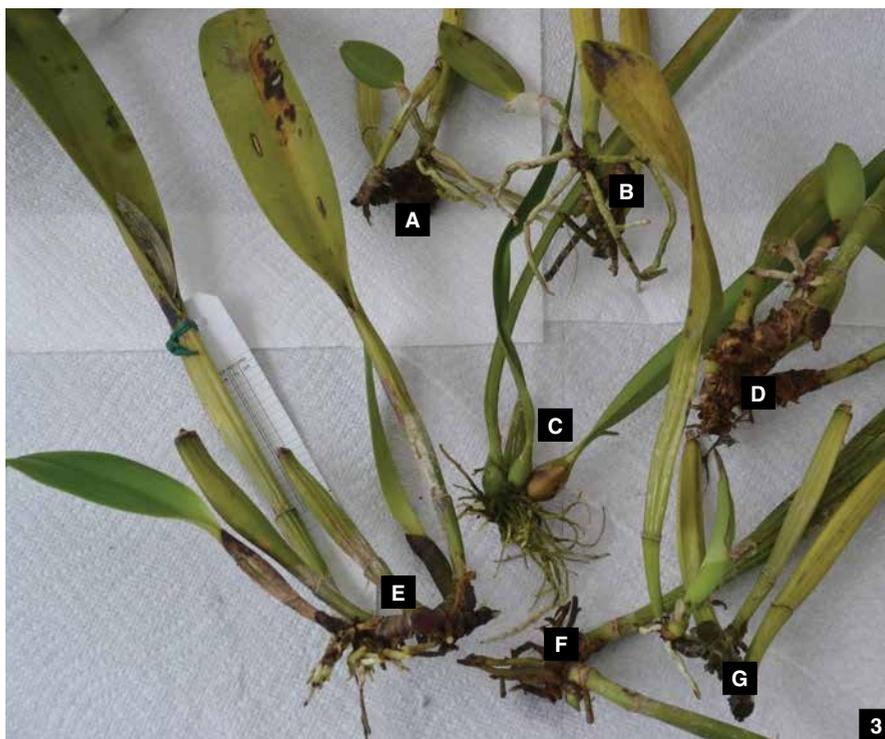
Other methods that involve potting the backbulbs in one fashion or another, including laying the backbulbs on a tray of moist medium, are based on the theory that contact with moist medium will eventually trigger growth.

One method that is almost never mentioned is standing the cleaned backbulbs in water. The simple mention of orchids in standing water tends to raise hairs on the back of the neck, but this method works surprisingly well. Not all backbulbs will eventually sprout, but neither do they turn into a smelly mess like cut flowers in water. And it is necessary to change the water only if a backbulb begins to decay.

The backbulb divisions are cleaned of sheathing bracts, all dead roots are removed and the division is stood upright in an open container of water covering the dormant eyes. This container then goes on the growing bench and water is added to maintain a constant level covering the eyes. Depending on the backbulb and the age of the dormant eyes, sprouting can occur in as little as a week, but in virtually all cases an eye will sprout in a month or less. The backbulbs can be left standing in water until the new growth develops sufficiently to begin rooting, and then potted in your choice of potting medium. I've personally left these divisions in water for up to six months. By that point, the new growth is very well developed with roots several inches long.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my old friend Leon Glicenstein for reminding me that so few people today know that this nearly foolproof method works. — Ron McHatton, AOS chief operating officer (email: rmchatton@aos.org).



[1] Backbulbs of *Cattleya* Lucille Small 'Marshall', FCC/AOS cleaned and dead roots removed.

[2] Same backbulb section standing in water.

[3] An assortment of backbulb propagations produced in standing water: (A-B) two different cultivars of *Cattleya* Heathii after six months in water – note fully formed new growths and roots, (C) *Encyclia tampensis* after six months, (D) *Cattleya* Maui Plum after four months, (E) *Cattleya warscewiczii* with two new growths produced – six months in water, (F) A different *C. warscewiczii* cultivar after one month – note new growth just initiating and (G) the same *C. Lucille* Small 'Marshall', FCC/AOS backbulbs after four months in water.