

SARCO GROWING HINTS

The term 'sarco' is commonly used to refer to a group of genera including SARCOCHILUS, PLECTORRHIZA, RHINERRHIZA, PARASARCOCHILUS, SCHISTOSTYLIS, PERISTANTHUS etc. (all cool growers) and even PHALAENOPSIS (namely amabilis, the only native and definitely a warm grower). The term is also used to refer to an ever increasing number of hybrids both within and between these groups. The use of this term is often incorrect.

GROWING CONDITIONS

They are grown in a shadehouse. I use one layer of 70% shadecloth in winter (maybe Easter to the October long weekend) for the rest of the year two layers of 70% are used. When I lived in Sydney the floor under my benches was a layer of pinebark while the walkways were made of river pebbles and on hot days these were hosed down to moderate temperature and increase humidity. Some protection from westerly winds proved beneficial.

Since moving to the south Coast my greenhouse floor is simply weed mat which has been fixed to the shadecloth walls to create security from the bugs. At this stage maintaining humidity is not an issue in the new location but the weed mat is easily kept clean with an occasional sweep. I use weldmesh benches and round pots to increase airflow around the plants.

MIXES

I have been using the same for Sarcos and Dens -

80% treated pine bark, medium to coarse grade (or a mix of the two),

20% river pebbles of a similar size to the bark.

Over the last couple of years I have been using coco chips as a substitute for pine bark as the quality of the bark has decreased and price has escalated. A trip to Melbourne revealed that many growers were already converted to a variety of cocopeat products many of which were readily available at show sales stalls. An internet search of 'orchids + cocopeat' revealed that cocopeat is widely used by U.S. orchid nurseries and so I began experimenting. For sarcs I used cocomulch – a chunky mix of coconut husk pieces which I soaked, flushed and sieved out the fines but I now use 'Orchidmate' to save doing this. It is a great product.. I have combined this in various ratios using the following materials;

River pebbles

"Maidenwell Stone'

Perlite (coarser grades)

Coarse pinebark

Styrofoam chips

Although I have made some mistakes which mostly relate to overwatering, all experimental mixes seem to be growing well over the short term but the long term success will be the true test. My current preference is a mix of 80% coarse (15 – 20 mm) coco chips and coarse Maidenwell stone which is shaken into the pots and **never** pushed in with a stick or thumbs which may result in a more stable newly potted plant but

a drainage disaster waiting to happen at a later stage. Maidenwell stone is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain, especially the larger grades, so an alternative such as pinebark or polystyrene chips may need to be considered in the future.

A few Sydney growers have experienced some problems with coco chips and discussions with them usually reveals that their problems stem from one or more of the following; poor watering technique, firmly packing the media into pots, using straight coco chips with nothing to 'open it up' (these people have 1 or 2 years of good growing then disaster as the mix 'packs down'), using a cheap coco product more suited to garden mulching or using too fine a grade.

POTS & MOUNTS

1. Pots; Plastic squat pots, well drained, are my preference. Watch out for fat juicy roots or pebbles blocking your drainage! Terracotta pots are also very good.
2. Mounts; Some species prefer to be mounted (usually *Sarco. falcatus*, *weinthalii*, *Plecto. tridentata*, *Rhiner. divitiflora*) and there are endless possibilities that will suit them. Try some of the following - red cedar, melaleuca branches, treefern slabs, cork, aged fence palings, bagasse or gutterguard pouches filled with bark. You should not overlook tying some to live trees in your garden. When mounting them you can use fishing line or stocking strips or strips of shade cloth but you must tie them on tightly, around the roots and never the stems
3. I have recently had some success with 50mm seedling tubes cut in half lengthways and hot glued to a piece of cork or similar. A plant placed in the half tube with a couple of coco chips seems to benefit from having the best of both worlds.

FERTILISING

As for all other natives - **little and often** - but as sarcos grow year round and especially in autumn, then winter fertilising should be maintained. I often forget to fertilise so now I apply a top-dressing of blood and bone with dolomite in a 50:50 mixture after they are repotted and again every few months especially when rain is coming. I am told that coco peat has a lack of calcium so I use dolomite while some calcium nitrate could be beneficial.

Most fertilisers are suitable and the following have been used with little problem - Aquasol, Nitrosol, fish emulsion, Campbells, Phostrogen, Peters, HSO 8, Nutricote and similar products. A little extra Epsom Salts and iron chelates occasionally does no harm. It is always a good idea to alternate between brands and always water at least once between applications of fertiliser. I have recently come to the conclusion that it is imperative to use some organic fertiliser and I find that I am using chemical fertilizers less often.

The use of lime is popular with growers who use pine bark but is not recommended for coco mixes which are not as acid as decaying bark and could see Ph rise to unacceptable levels.

REPOTTING

This can be done anytime but avoid the hottest and coldest periods, autumn seems to be the best. They like fresh mix and should be repotted at least every two years. A drench with Seasol immediately after potting seems to eliminate transplant shock.

Never compress the coco chips into the pot (it is almost compulsive for humans to 'firm' plants in with their thumbs!) This is responsible for most of the early failures when using coco chips as it defeats the purpose of having an open, well drained mix. Yes, – I am nagging!

WATERING

Sarcos have no psuedobulbs and so cannot withstand long periods without water. They are surprisingly resilient due to their thick leaves and fleshy roots which enable them to survive short dry spells and watering routines should reflect this. Lack of water is less critical if high levels of humidity are maintained.

S. ceciliae has its own requirements preferring to be grown a little on the dry side. I used to grow them in terra cotta pots under cover and give them a good drenching then allow them to dry out.

If you are using coco chips then you need to understand that you are using a very absorbent substance that needs to have every chip 'filled' with water unlike bark mixes where only the surface of each particle gets wet I Guess the message here is that you need to water coco mixes more intensely but less often. Soaking pots in a container of water would be ideal but, for most of us, impractical.

If you were to water your orchids and then go around and tip some out of their pots you may get a real surprise as to the inconsistent job you have done – especially if you compare pots from different parts of your benches. Plants on the edges of benches seem to come off worst.

PESTS

Sarcos have no particular problems in this area except for *S. ceciliae* which occasionally becomes infested with scale. I prefer to scratch them off and keep the ants at bay as much as possible. White oil, the recommended treatment should be used with caution or you can do what I did – stop growing them!

An occasional spray with one of the newer pest oil products can be useful while phosacid seems to be an effective and safe fungicide.

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