Stanhopeas Aren't Finicky

By Barney Greer

[Courtesy Campbelltown and Districts Orchid Society - From an article published in the Australian Orchid
Review, December 1994 - Printed with permission and thanks to AOR)]

I suppose the most frequent question asked about *Stanhopea* culture is: "What's the best compost to grow them in?" On the evidence, a fair answer seems to be that it doesn't matter two hoots.

I've seen Stanhopeas doing very well in Cymbidium compost. Some first rate growers use nothing but sphagnum, as early English and American growers were doing a century ago. An English visitor told me the other day, that he grows his stanhopeas in a mix of bark, white pumice and charcoal. For years I basketed my Stanhopeas in straight, seedling-size fir bark. Other years I have relied on a mix of cattleya-size bark and cymbidium compost. I've also heard of an Australian enthusiast who grows his Stanhopeas successfully in nothing but old horse manure, "and he never needs to fertilise". Currently my plants are going into Werner Deisel's "miscellaneous mix" because I have it on hand, although, with this seasons' super dry conditions, I sometimes add a handful of cymbidium compost or mix in some sphagnum.

Ideally, of course, one should stay with one unchanged medium to keep drainage and moisture levels constant, but which growing medium you use is clearly not vital. Keep in mind how Stanhopeas live in the wild. They grow not only in branches or in crotches of trees, but also on sloping rocks on the faces of Andean ravines and on the steep edges of road cuttings. Fast drainage is an essential part of their existence.

The Business of Baskets

The commonly used wire basket may not be elegant but it's hard to beat. The slatted wooden basket looks better but Stanhopeas, although beautiful, are not very bright, they are very likely to direct the emerging flower-spear straight into one of those wooden slats so that it never finds it way out.

Lining the basket

I have always used paper bark for lining and it works pretty well. I'm told that coconut fibre is a good alternative so long as you don't mind the birds plundering it, but stay clear of the commercial coconut liners bonded with plastic. One minor problem with paper bark is that the bottom area tends to rot away in a year or so, letting the compost fall out. One is then tempted to use a thicker layer of bark next time. Be wary of this. That thicker layer can easily become a fertiliser-sogged lump that is most unhealthy for roots.

I suggest making sure that the drainage is ample by using polyurethane pebbles or larger bark chips as a bottom layer of the growing mix and then making several holes through the bottom of the paper bark so that when the plant is hosed you see streams of water gushing out like a shower. To preserve that bottom layer of paper bark, on Chris Arnott's advice, I've lately been putting a circular piece of wide-gauge 'Gutterguard' mesh (about 5" across) between the bark and bottom of the basket - this works well.

Roger Kramer's method, using nothing but sphagnum, is to line the basket with newspaper, four sheets thick, then in goes the plant cradled in the sphagnum. He tells me the paper goes grey and loses its raw look in a short time. The roots (very vigorous in the moss) quickly make a network in and through the paper, and the flower spears, of course, come through with ease.

By the way, whatever potting medium you use, make sure the plant is **not** wobbling in the basket. Tie a leaf or two to the wire hangers for support. Sometimes I also use Twistie wire to tie the newly planted division steady in the basket.

Fun with Flower Spears

Flower spears come with the most mature active bulbs and will usually emerge through the side or bottom of the basket, but quite a few species, like the completely hornless *S. Ecornuta*, also *S. Pulla*, *S. Cirrhata* and *S. Candida*, send out their flower spears sideways across the top of the compost. These are very like to run straight into the top wires of the basket and commit suicide, so watch for them and use pliers to bend obstructing wires out of the way.

Watch out also for the flower spear that comes out

sideways and *then* wants to dive down and lose itself in the depths of the compost. A good ploy is to scoop away a little compost so that you can slide a plastic tag under the emerging flower spear and thus help it to slide out the easy way.

Drainage

Since drainage is so important, why not grow Stanhopeas on vertical bark slabs or rafts or evening trees? Indeed, why not. I have been growing a gnarled old plant of *S. nigroviolacea* for at least 15 years in the crotch of a stringy-bark eucalypt outside our kitchen window. At first the bulbs battled away, yellow and tough, but the plant flowered well. It has now completely adjusted and flowers freely each year on both the morning sun side and the afternoon sun side of the tree.

Bark Slabs

Stanhopeas will certainly grow and flower on bark slabs or rafts but my experience has been that the plants are happier and the bulbs more robust growing in baskets with their roots kept cool and moist in the compost. Plants on slabs will obviously need more frequent watering.

Time to Re-Basket?

Re-basketing is best done about every second year before the new crop of roots develops but when the fresh growths have started to grow. Although large specimen plants can be dramatic, plants divided into pieces to fit six inch or eight inch baskets usually to grow and flower just as well or better and are easier to handle. In fact, some of the rarer species which have been reluctant to flower have often burst into bloom for me just after being divided and re-basketed.

Note: Don't be in too much of a hurry to rush Stanhopea seedlings or very small divisions into baskets. While the plants are small and tender, they seem to do better in the moister environment of a pot. Basket them when they have made substantial bulbs, are growing well in, say, a four inch pot and are moving towards flowering size.

Some Like it Hot

In Sydney, the most frequently grown Stanhopeas flower happily in cymbidium conditions. These include *S. nigroviolacea, S. tigrina, S. Wardii, S. Oculata, S. Graveolens, S. Embreei, S. Hernandezii, S. Pozoi.* Our garden climate suits them well.

More tropical species, like *S. tricornis, S. Ecornuta, S. Connate, S. cirrhata, S. Pulla, S. Candida* and *S. Reichenbachiana* appreciate warm humid glasshouse conditions in the colder months but will enjoy growing outside in the fresh air of the garden in summer. Give them a session of hanging in the flickering sun and shade of a frangipani tree. They love it.

***Editor's Note**. In the article, Mr Greer shows a picture of his basketed stanhopeas hanging in rows beneath a large frangapani tree on his property, and continues*:

These plants are protected by our house and face north-east towards the ocean. They have grown there right through two winters shaded only by odd cast shadows from the naked branches of a large frangapani tree and branches of other more distant trees. *(Mr Greer's home was about 2K from Long Reef Beach, as the crow flies).* They include *S. Florida, S. Maculosa, S. Deltoidea, S. Platyceras* and *S. Ospinae.* Because they are precious, I have been keeping them in a warm glasshouse in Winter. They have grown better and flowered better out there where the breezes blow, but extra watering care is needed to be sure the plants don't dry out.

The Good Sense of Selfing

You can amuse yourself by making odd hybrid crossings of stanhopeas - but why do it? You won't invent anything more fantastic than what exists already. The varied and exciting Stanhopea species (many of them are rare and endangered) are now absurdly expensive to import but are not very difficult to 'self'. So, if you have one of the rarer Stanhopeas, do civilisation a good turn by coaxing a pod onto it and someone will surely flask the results for you.

Note: When you have captured the pollina on the end of a toothpick, it's a good idea to wait for about two hours before sliding the pollen into the stigma. The action is a little bit tricky, but persevere and you'll succeed. From there on, watching the pods fatten and ripen is exciting. Reckon on 7 to 8 months waiting and watching, then harvest the pod **before** it bursts open. The resulting flasked seedlings will be worth a fortune, well, a small fortune.

Mr Barney Greer's book **'The Astonishing Stanhopeas - the Upside-down Orchids'** is available from Orchidaceous Books.