

A New Special Orchid Fertilizer

For many years, significant numbers of cymbidium growers, particularly in South Australia and Victoria have been using a pelletised organic fertilizer just below the surface of the potting mix, during repotting or growing on. Plants treated in such a way have grown faster than those not treated. We are not sure if they are getting better nutrition, the potting mix is being enriched, friendly bacteria action is activated or other factors. Whatever the reason, they certainly grow more quickly after application.

In South Australia, the fertilizer manufacturer Neutrog, is very generous to the Cymbidium Orchid Club of South Australia (COCSA). Every year Neutrog assists the club, by donating fertilizer showbags for sale at the spring show. Additionally they provide samples for special promotions and offer their product at very special prices for members. Approximately twelve months ago they released a new fertilizer, *Seamungus* and promoted it to club members. The product proved very successful, initiating improved growth, particularly the root system, as plants come out of their winter slow grow stage. The club in return, actively acknowledges Neutrog, with many growers endorsing and recommending use of the Neutrog range of products. No grower to my knowledge gets any financial rewards for doing so.

Towards the end of year 2006, the CEO of Neutrog Australia, Angus Irwin approached the COCSA with an offer to produce a special orchid fertilizer, *Strike Back*. He had previously introduced a new rose fertilizer, *Sudden Impact*, and had been helped in the development and promotion of that fertilizer by the Rose Societies throughout Australia. The Rose Societies now receive substantial royalties from all *Sudden Impact* sold. Angus asked our club to be involved, initially in testing the new fertilizer, and then later, **if we were completely happy with it**, to endorse it. South Australia was asked to contact other interstate cymbidium growing clubs, seeking their participation. Members of selected clubs in Victoria, New South Wales, Western Australia, Tasmania and of course, South Australia, were all given 10kg of the new fertilizer, with usage suggestions, and a request to provide feedback on its performance. Selected commercial growers were given large quantities of the fertilizer, and other clubs were given sample packs during guest speaking engagements. It was acknowledged that it would probably be at least 12 months before conclusive results could be demonstrated.

At Valley Orchids we were given a commercial amount and immediately started applying it to our plants. We were in a very good position, in that we grow large numbers of some varieties and were able to treat several hundred similar sized plants in the following way

1. No fertilizer
2. Treat with Rapid Raiser, just below the surface during potting
3. Treat with Seamungus, just below the surface during potting
4. Treat with Strike Back, just below the surface during potting

It should be noted that all our plants are additionally fertigated regularly, via our sprinkler system and a fertilizer injector.

It should also be noted, that Neutrog's initial recommended application procedure, was for *Rapid Raiser*, or *Seamungus*, after flowering each year, and up to Christmas, then *Strike Back*, applied monthly, to the surface of the potting mixture after Christmas, until end of flowering. Commercially, because we have so many plants, it is impractical to do this so we added it during repotting.

Showbench growers, with smaller collections, should be able to do as recommended, and will certainly do so if improved performance can be demonstrated.

It is now 3 to 6 months since we applied the first *Strike Back* and we are very pleased with the result. The first indication, is the amazing change in colour of the plants treated with *Strike Back*. They are incredibly dark green, a colour I have not previously seen in healthy growing cymbidiums in Australia. They reminded me very much of the plants we saw at the Yunnan nursery in China (see AOR article), and I am still amazed about the performance of the plants at that nursery. We saw huge numbers of plants, in 7 inch pots, flowering for the first time, all with at least 4 flower spikes, but many with 8 or more flower spikes. They also had no back bulbs or leaf blemishes. I am hopeful our deep green foliated plants, treated with *Strike Back*, will produce in a similar manner. They are visibly better looking than the 3 other groups of plants treated with the different fertilizers.

In the first 6 or 8 weeks of the trial, I could see no improvement in size, over the other 3 trial groups. Now there is a visible improvement in the size of the plants treated with *Strike Back*. It is very difficult to accurately measure the improvement, but I am told if one can see an increased size, it is probably at least 20% improvement. Only a few were big enough to flower this season. I eagerly await to see if the improved performance so far, will see improved flowering in year 2008.

I am getting reports from other growers, locally and interstate, mostly confirming our improved growth rates. There was however a minor disaster early on, when one grower in South Australia applied *Strike Back*, too heavily, and killed a lot of small plants being potted on. Investigations revealed that perhaps 100 grams of fertilizer was applied, instead of just the 20 grams recommended. Larger plants survived, but the small ones perished within 2 weeks. It did unfortunately deter some growers from trying the fertilizer.

In Adelaide, we intend to have information seeking sessions regularly, during our monthly meetings. We will try to pass on whatever we discover, but would also appreciate feedback from interstate growers. Angus Irwin has already indicated he is prepared to change the fertilizer composition, if feedback shows a need to do so.

This trial is very exciting, and if it does succeed in promoting more vigorous cymbidiums and other orchid types, we will all benefit. Watch this space.

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