

The Secret of Fluffing up Sphagnum Moss – by Jim Brydie

On a visit to Royale Orchids just before Christmas, owner Kevin Hipkins gave me a tip on using sphagnum moss that has proven absolutely amazing to me. But first, do you all know what sphagnum moss is?

Sphagnum is a genus of about 200 species of mosses found throughout the world. They grow in bogs, which are more or less shallow lakes or depressions which have a layer of the living sphagnum and other plants growing over the surface above a very wet mush of decaying material underneath. These lower layers become what are called peat moss.



I have been using Sphagnum moss as a medium for many years but in the early days I was always able to buy live 'sphag' which is supplied in a clear plastic bag, is wet but not dripping, and contains a mix of the green live moss and the yellowish brown moss from just underneath. The sphagnum moss we buy is harvested from certain bogs in various parts of the world (usually government controlled) so that they can continually regenerate, which can take between 8 to 30 years.

Live sphagnum is nearly impossible to buy anymore. Most growers now buy dried compressed sphagnum moss which is sold in various sizes. I buy a 'bale' which weighs 3kg, is 80 litres of compressed moss, and makes 240 litres of moss when wet, dampened, and fluffed up. On Garrie Bromley's suggestion, I bought one of those big see-through plastic boxes with a clip on lid (at the reject shop) that is a perfect fit to store the dried bale. It fits under the benches in the shadehouse and keeps the bale dry while, over a period of time like a year or more, I harvest small quantities from it to use.



I have a smaller see through box I keep in my potting area, to hold a quantity of dampened, fluffed up sphag ready to use, and here is where we get down to the secret. How do you wet compressed dried sphag?

I had never asked anyone how to do it. It seemed rather obvious – put it in a bucket, fill it with water until it is saturated, drain it off, and then squeeze out the moss to remove the excess water. This was my process for at least several years but the resulting moist sphag wasn't anywhere near as good as the live stuff. At first I thought that it was because the sphag I was buying just wasn't good quality, but it was all that was going so I studiously picked out and discarded the worst and put up with it.

More recently I wondered if there was something wrong with the way I was using it. About a year ago I was reading a Japanese website about growing *Sophronitis coccinea* in sphagnum moss and was surprised that the grower said to dampen an amount of dried sphagnum but whatever you do, don't soak it and wring it out. I knew this was an important clue, but how else do you dampen desiccated sphag? When it is as dry as it comes in the bale, it doesn't seem to wet very easily – or so I thought. I didn't follow it up.

And then there was that visit to Royale. During the visit, he was showing a few of us a deflasking method using sphag. His sphag looked so fresh and fluffy and the perfect amount of moisture. I asked how he got the sphag like that and he told me that it was dried sphag and that he prepared it a day in advance.

He sort of fluffed it up dry, dampening it with just small quantities of water, bit by bit, fluffing and mixing the dampening sphag all the time to allow the moisture to spread. I listened carefully. I could hardly believe that this small change in the way you wet sphag could make that much difference but the proof was in front of me in Kevin's hands.

When I got home I tried it and it worked! When you first start dampening the dry sphag it looks like the small amount of water you are adding is hardly doing anything but sphag seems to have an amazing ability to absorb and spread the moisture among a volume of itself. As you fluff and mix, separating the stands, the moisture spreads, and as you keep adding small amounts, the whole volume you are mixing becomes uniformly damp and fluffed up. Magic.



I don't know what squeezing water out of sphag does to it but it seems to damage it in some way. I no longer do it.

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