

Potting and Repotting Your Plumeria

I recently had breakfast in a restaurant that was full of FFA youth. For those of you who don't know, FFA stands for Future Farmers of America. I'm a city guy and I don't know much about the FFA, except that some of the youth raise animals for show. They choose an animal of good stock that they would like to raise. Then they apply lots of patience and hard work and pay special attention to the animals' food and care. They try to raise a championship animal. After a lot of attention to detail, they take the animal to show and perhaps they win a ribbon, money or even a scholarship. While I was thinking about these youth, I realized I have this same attitude towards growing my Plumeria: patience, hard work and lots of attention to detail. Pots and watering are important details and considering them together can help raise a championship Plumeria. (If you have not read the article on "Water, Fertilizer and Light for Plumerias" read it first, as it will help you better understand this article)

After tinkering over the years with various pot size and type combinations, I have developed some simple guidelines for growing potential championship Plumerias. I have noticed that many people think Plumerias like to be rootbound. Most people plant their cuttings in a one gallon or even smaller pot. That is their choice. (That is why I write these articles, to share information, not to infer that there is only one way to grow a Plumeria). Quite the opposite is really the case, and for those of us growing plants in pots, a strong root structure is the key to the difference between a good tree and a great tree. Actually, the key is the trunk, but, in the early life of a Plumeria, as the roots go, so goes the trunk.

A root bound Plumeria has a difficult time increasing trunk diameter. A small diameter trunk cannot support a big tree crown (which is what we want), no matter how good the root structure gets later, so it is important to focus on the roots early in the trees growth cycle. Everything from the roots must go through the trunk to get to the crown. If, in the early life of the tree, the root structure is restricted, the trunk will gain height but not much diameter. The crown will not be compact because the trunk will not be able to support additional tips. The result is long branches between flowering. It will take additional years and a trim or two to get the trunk up to speed.

To get a larger diameter trunk as soon as possible, always start your cutting in the biggest pot possible, the bigger the better. Five gallons is a good starting size. Then later on, one repot to a 15 gallon or so. Don't go smaller unless you have no choice. This might sound extreme, but think about it from the trees' viewpoint. If the tree starts with one tip and flowers you might now have three tips. Now the plant could use a 3 times bigger pot. So just start with the bigger pot to begin with. Don't use clay or decorator pots. Use the black plastic nursery pots. I know they are ugly, but when the plants are flowering, nobody notices the black pots. It is easier to control the moisture in a plastic pot and the roots don't cling to the plastic like they do in a clay pot so it is easier to transplant into a bigger pot. Watch the cutting grow and be preparing to have the bigger pot ready when it is time to repot. It is time to repot when you can see some of the small hair roots trying to emerge from the drain holes in the bottom edge of the pot. (Note: you will not see these fine hair roots if you have the pot setting on cement or perhaps a wood board. The pot needs to be setting on the cool dirt to draw the roots down to the bottom of the pot.

You want the root structure to develop as rapidly and as quickly as possible. You don't want anything hindering root growth. You want to encourage the root structure to spread its legs and get started. Put a root stimulator like Rootone on the end of the cutting before you plant it. Always plant the cutting in a light loamy soil. No dirt or sand, just organic material with some perlite. Then water it and leave it alone. Be careful not to over water the pot. The cutting has no root structure and so can only take a little moisture out of the soil, Don't expect to water the

plant for about 5 weeks or until the leaves are growing vigorously. I use a soil moisture meter so I will know just when to water.

After the cutting has perhaps 10 to 12 new leaves and is showing some growth on the stem, put a bit of time release fertilizer on the pot. I use 11-40-6. By the way, the phosphate (the middle number) does not migrate into the soil very fast (only a few inches a year) so I suggest mixing about ½ cup of this fertilizer into your bag of soil before you use it. Now remember, Plumeria are trees. Let the tree grow as big as possible before trimming it. If it started from a cutting, that might be 5 or 7 years before the first cut. If it won't fit in the garage no matter what, then you can trim it.

When you do finally trim it, trim from the top down and trim only once each year. Cut it way back, the strong trunk and roots will produce many tips where before there was just one or two. Finally you will have a compact lower to the ground Plumeria. Just what you wanted if you are growing in pots. I will discuss trimming plumeira trees another time.