



Planting Tips for Containerized Plants

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This spring has seen quite the surge in plant purchases both for vegetable gardens and well as ornamental plantings. Most plants that we bring home are in containers. This is good in one sense as all of their roots are in the pot. When plants are shipped bare-root or purchased as balled and burlap specimens, often some of the roots are removed or injured during digging and transport. Also, because the roots are intact, container plants can be set in the ground from spring through fall if proper after planting care is given.

On the other hand, often plants, especially woody ones, are left in their containers too long and plants become root-bound. Older roots become woody and start encircling containers. These often entangled roots can inhibit good, strong root formation and sometimes end up girdling the tree or shrub leading to an early demise. When adding woody plants to a bed or as a specimen, often smaller sized plants, while not giving you that immediate instant landscape look, establish faster and are more economical.

Rapid establishment and good plant growth is dependent on healthy roots. A plant's roots have two major functions – to anchor a plant and to provide the plant with water and nutrients. A vigorous, thriving root system can also help a plant respond to environmental stresses like drought or aboveground grazing by insects or other pests.

Before digging your planting hole, inspect your potential planting site. Are there any soil problems that need to be addressed? Is the soil compacted, poorly drained, very dense with limited aeration? Is there adequate amounts of organic matter in the soil for the type of plant you want to grow? How about the soil pH – does it indicated extremely acidic or alkaline conditions? One quick way to determine if a soil is compacted or not is to try pushing a long, thin screwdriver or a metal rod with about the same diameter as a metal clothes rod into the soil. If it does not go into moist soil with relative ease, the soil is likely compacted and should be loosened before planting. A soil pH test can determine if any limestone should be added.

Many older gardeners are familiar with the phrase, 'Dig a \$50 hole for a \$5 plant' and this is still wonderful advice whether one is planting annuals, perennials, trees or shrubs. Plants are either set in individually or perhaps a whole garden bed or hedgerow will be planted at one time.

When planting individual perennials or small shrubs, dig the hole as deep as the plant's root ball but 2 to 3 times wider. I find it helpful to gently loosen the plant's roots and to remove any circling ones that form at the bottom of the pot. Do not worry if some of the potting mix is lost. Ideally the roots should be able to come in contact with the garden soil as quickly as possible. Less potting soil means this will happen faster.

Set the plant in the hole and make sure it is positioned so that the top of the root ball is level with the soil surface. Note the slight root flare at the base of a tree where the trunk meets the roots. This should be visible when the tree is planted. If the soil pH is too low, one can mix some limestone into the backfill. Otherwise do not add amendments such as compost, manure, packaged topsoil or peat moss to the soil being used to fill in around the roots. The reason for this being is that this creates what is known as the bathtub effect.

This is a problem for two reasons. The amended soil immediately surrounding the roots is more conducive to root growth than the native soil so roots will be less likely to expand into the native soil. This limits a plant's ability to become established. Second, the amended soil often holds more water if additions of organic matter were made and during excessive rainy periods, or if watered too frequently, the roots can become waterlogged and root rots can set in.

For areas that need amending, do so evenly over the whole site so the soil is relatively homogenous. One might want to loosen the soil if compacted, add sources of organic matter to help improve soil structure and drainage, or add limestone and fertilizer. Whether digging a single planting hole or amending a whole new planting site, know that your hard work will be rewarded with happy, healthy plants.

For questions about planting or queries on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.

