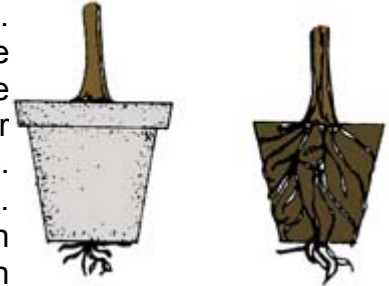


# Repotting Houseplants



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**When:** Plants that need to be repotted will give you some signals. Roots protruding from drain holes or showing on the soil surface are a strong indication that the plant has outgrown the pot. If the plant requires watering very frequently, or wilts again soon after watering, it is likely that the soil has lost its ability to hold moisture. In these cases, it is best to repot the plant as soon as possible. The best time to repot plants is when they are actively growing in the spring and summer. You should avoid repotting plants when they are dormant as the repotting process will stimulate growth to begin in the wrong season. If the plant is in bud or bloom, repotting may cause the buds or flowers to drop off.



**Preparation:** Begin by thoroughly watering the plant you want to repot. This will make it easier to remove the plant from the pot and reduce the chance of transplant shock. Assemble the materials you will need on a waist-high work table.

**Pot:** Select a pot that is one or two inches larger in diameter than the old pot. If you use a pot that is too large, there will be an excessive amount of soil without plant roots. This soil will remain wet and may encourage root rot. Be sure your new pot is clean and has a drain hole. Clean a used pot with water and a scrub brush. It is a good idea to sterilize used pots with a solution of 1 part bleach, 9 parts water. Rinse the pot well.

**Soil:** Select a potting soil that is appropriate for the type of plant you are repotting. Cacti and succulent plants require a cactus mix; orchids do best in an orchid mix, etc. If you are unsure which type of soil to use, consult our garden experts at Gale's Westlake Garden Center.



Remove the plant from its pot by gently turning the pot over, using your fingers to catch the root ball as it emerges. It may be necessary to gently tap the pot rim with a trowel or on a table edge. If the plant does not readily come out of the pot, **do not pull it out by the stem**. This will tear roots or break the stem. Instead, set the pot on its side roll it

around to loosen the root ball. You may try to push the root ball out from the drain hole with a rounded instrument. In extreme cases, you may have to break the pot to get the plant out. Discard any loose soil. You may use a gentle spray of water to remove old soil.

Examine the plant's root system. Healthy roots are cream colored or light brown. Dark brown roots are dead or dying and should be trimmed off. Use your fingers to gently tease out any roots that were circling the wall of the pot. If the roots are in a tight ball, you may need to score the outside of the root ball with a sharp knife, penetrating no more than  $\frac{1}{8}$  to  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch. Be careful to avoid damaging tap roots or major roots. If you want to keep the plant in the same sized pot, you will need to trim off the outer  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the long fibrous roots. You are now ready to put the plant in its new pot.

Cover the drainage hole in the new pot with a pot shard, moss, a coffee filter, or two layers of paper towel to prevent soil from spilling out the hole. **Do not add stones, gravel, or other materials to improve drainage.** This will only cause a “perched water table,” when excess water stays closer to the roots of your plant. To illustrate this point, soak a rectangular sponge with water and hold it up so that the long side of the sponge is at the bottom. Water will remain in the bottom inch or so of the sponge. Now rotate the sponge ninety degrees so that the short side of the sponge is at the bottom. More water will come out, because only the bottom inch or so will hold water. The deeper the column of soil, the better the drainage.

Pile some fresh new potting soil in the bottom of the new pot. **Do not reuse old potting soil;** it has little or no nutrients and may transmit insects or disease. Create a cone with the soil and place the plant at the top of the cone so that its roots fan outward. Adjust the height of the cone so that the crown of the plant where the roots first come out of the stem is between ½ and 1 inch below the rim of the pot. This is where the soil surface will be.

Hold the plant straight up and down as you fill fresh new soil around the sides of the plant. You may gently tamp the soil down to avoid air pockets, but **do not pack the soil.** Large plants may require staking at first to keep them upright. There should be about ¾ inch between the soil surface and the rim of the pot. This will allow you to water the plant without having water spill over the rim.



Water the plant thoroughly so that the new potting soil is thoroughly moistened. Be sure to rinse off any potting soil on the leaves. If your potting soil does not contain fertilizer, you may fertilize the plant at this time. If you have done a lot of root pruning, you may use Bonide Plant Starter or Root & Grow to help the roots recover. Let the plant drain for ten minutes to remove excess water.

Set your repotted plant in indirect light for a week or two before returning to direct sun. If you have trimmed the roots a great deal, mist the plant daily for the first several days as the roots recover.

If you have further questions about repotting your plant, feel free to email me with your questions at [Roger@RogerBolger.com](mailto:Roger@RogerBolger.com).



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