

Help plants settle into their new homes

By RICK ROSEN
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CHORES

When houseplants don't grow well, or they start to look sick, it may be time to give them a new home.

A houseplant's home is its pot. The plants may have outgrown that pot, which means it's time to leave the starter home and move to a larger abode.

"Houseplants eventually get root-bound, when the pot is so full of roots that plants have no more space in which to grow," writes author and gardening columnist Julie Bawden-Davis. Also, salts can build up, and that can harm plant health.

Now through summer, as houseplants actively grow, is a good time to repot them, says Ms. Bawden-Davis in her new book, *Indoor Gardening the Organic Way*.

And though talking your plants through the move to their new home, as the author admits doing, is not standard gardening practice, the book has great ideas and techniques for repotting



Indoor Gardening the Organic Way

Julie Bawden-Davis
(Taylor Trade Publishing, \$19.95)

houseplants, whether you are an organic gardener or not.

She recommends repotting when you see one or more of the following:

- Roots coming out the bottom of the pot, or a mass of tangled roots in the pot.

- Constant thirst and soil that dries out quickly.

- Water rushing through the pot when watering.

- Sluggish growth.

- Top-heaviness, which indicates the plant has outgrown the pot.

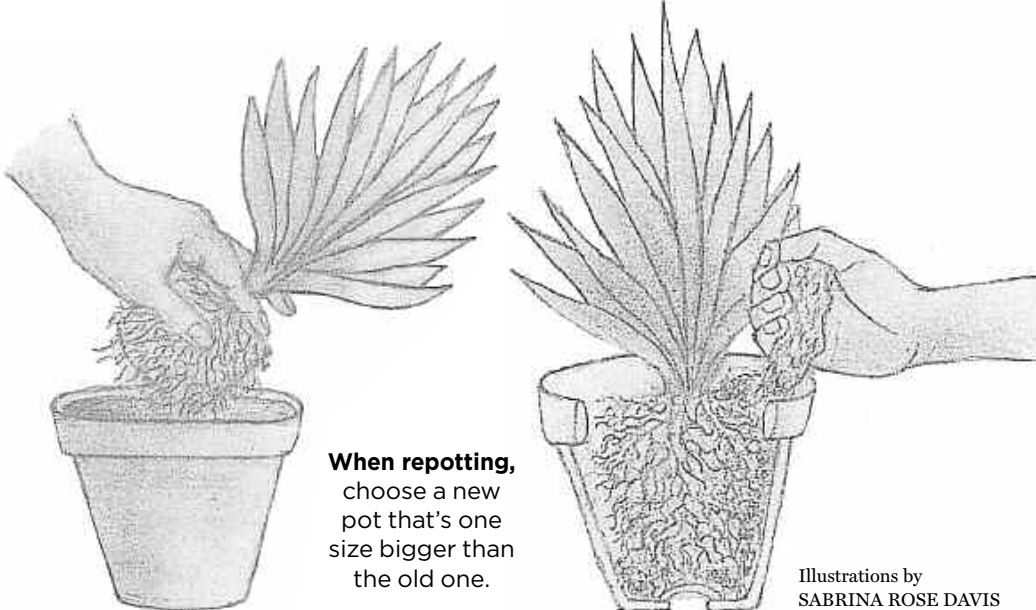
- Staining on the soil surface, indicating salt buildup.

- A pH reading (a measure of the acidity or alkalinity of the soil) that's wrong for that particular plant.

Remember: Pot size matters. "When repotting,

select a pot that is no more than one pot size up, which translates to no more than two inches bigger in circumference," she writes.

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When repotting, choose a new pot that's one size bigger than the old one.

Illustrations by SABRINA ROSE DAVIS

YOU CAN DO IT: REPOTTING HOW-TOS

Julie Bawden-Davis offers six steps for successful repotting:

1 Place a metal or plastic screen over the new pot's drainage holes so that soil won't leak onto floors or counters.

2 Combine organic granular fertilizer at half- or quarter-strength with soil. "Pour in water and mix well until the soil is moist but not soggy."

3 Remove the plant from the pot. If it won't budge, invert the pot. If that doesn't work, run a sharp knife around the inside edge and try again. If all else fails, soak the plant in water for 20 to 30 minutes, or break the pot.

4 Gently shake the root ball to remove excess soil. If salt buildup is the reason to repot, rinse roots with water. Unwind any circling roots and cut back especially long ones. If the root mass tightly circles the ball, slice through the sides and bottom of the ball with a sharp knife.

5 Put new soil into the new pot, enough that when the plant is in the pot the soil comes up to 1/2 or 1 inch below the rim. Spread out the roots. Fill in with soil, tamping down to prevent air pockets. The soil level should end up even with the top of the root ball.

6 Water well. Wait a month before fertilizing.

SOURCE: *Indoor Gardening the Organic Way*



FILE 2001/Staff photo

Severely pruning the shrub *Abelia chinensis* to improve its shape should not set it back.

Should I prune my abelias?

We have abelias growing beside the driveway. They are about 45 to 50 years old and stand an average of 6 to 7 feet tall. To my knowledge, they have never been pruned. Their condition is poor due to drought, freezes, etc. I have been told by friends to prune them severely by cutting them down to 3 feet tall.

J.J., Richland Hills

You got good advice, especially if there are many dead stems in the plants. Abelias are tough and should snap back this summer. Apply compost and lava sand to the area or, better still, follow my Sick Tree Treatment. (See Resources.)

You have recommended agarita for sunny locations. Someone else has suggested I plant Indian hawthorn in a full-sun area.

My yard has about 2 feet of soil over white rock. I plan to improve the planting beds with compost and Texas greensand. Which plant would be better?

W.R., Dallas

Agarita is a better choice for the long term. It is good-looking and extremely durable. Just be careful of the thorny leaves when working with it. I rate agarita an A+, and it is a native shrub. Indian hawthorn rates a C+ and is an exotic import.

What's the most effective way to control grub worms?

R.T., Dallas

It's important to understand that many grub worms are beneficial. Only about 10 percent of the grubs in the soil eat plant

ORGANIC ANSWERS



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root zone. Do not add fill dirt unless it is absolutely necessary.

I have been an organic vegetable gardener for nine years. Each year, I add corneal to the top 2 or 3 inches of soil to control harmful fungi, to no avail. I then spray with corneal tea. My tomato plants look great at first, but then they start to die. Would planting hairy vetch help?

I also grow squash. I sprinkled food-grade diatomaceous earth around the squash plants. I even sprayed with Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*), but the squash and cucumber plants were killed by squash vine borers. Would hairy vetch solve this problem?

I also add lava sand, compost, Texas greensand and dry molasses to the soil.

L.H., North Richland Hills

I think you should spray aerated compost tea this spring. You also should mulch the plants with a combination of compost and shredded tree trimmings.

Try growing other varieties of your favorite vegetables to see whether they fare better. Spray the plants with garlic-pepper tea.

roots. The rest feed on dead and decaying organic matter and aerate the soil with their movements.

Grubs are the larvae of various types of beetles. The natural control is to grow nectar and pollen plants that attract native predators and parasites and to apply beneficial nematodes to the soil. Organic control, if necessary, includes applying compost and molasses to the soil and using light traps to catch adult beetles.

We have built a retaining wall that stands about 20 inches above the ground. We plan to add fill dirt near it and then plant grass. The root zones of several trees would be covered by the fill dirt. What should I do to make sure the trees don't die?

T.F., Emory

If the trees are important to you, adding soil would be a serious mistake. Piling fill dirt above the roots of trees is more damaging than cutting into the roots.

Re-evaluate your plan and try not to change the soil grade of the

RESOURCES

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1:00 pm "Women and Heart Disease"
Presented by Ellen L. Palmer, Ph.D., RN, Assistant Clinical Professor, UTA at Arlington School of Nursing; Texas Nurses Association, District Four CE Committee Chairwoman, 1 PM - 2 PM, 1 CRU

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