

Repair a Plant

Although it is a better strategy to find a perfect plant, sometimes what you desire is only grown in undesirable (non-permanent) soil. You can purge a container-grown plant that is growing in improper soil. This involves removing all, or at least 50%, of the growers potting medium and replacing it with a more permanent, more natural soil. Before starting you may need to have a location that will provide shade while rehabilitating the plant.

The danger faced with purging a leafy plant is that the roots are always damaged and water uptake is compromised for up to 1-2 weeks following the procedure. Leaves use (lose) water; the rest of the plant (stems and woody structures) loses relatively little. During the time it takes for the roots to regenerate, the leafy plant can totally dehydrate to death, especially if exposed to hot, dry conditions. If the purged plant is placed in a shady, humid location (under a bush or low tree) its water needs will be lessened. Removal of a significant amount of foliage or cutting back foliated stems will also lessen the water usage.

Deciduous plants are easy to purge without stressing in the winter during dormancy. They can also be done in summer if at least 90% of the foliage is removed. (The leaves will regrow before fall.)

Tropical plants are best purged in summer. Be sure to remove at least 90% of the leaves before starting if no shade is available. Houseplants are simply left indoors away from direct sun.

There are several techniques used to purge the roots of the wrong soil mix:

1. Attach a spray nozzle to your garden hose. A strong jet with relatively low water volume is quite efficient.
2. Use a sharp tool, such as a small size screwdriver, a sharpened chopstick or an ice pick, to loosen the soil around the roots and pick out large chunks of wood or bark. Often poking and prying the root ball from the bottom will result in a lot of material quickly falling away from the roots. It is important to take your time and preserve as much of the delicate root system as possible.
3. Combine both methods. I usually probe with a stick first and finish with water.

Once the roots are clean make certain they remain wet until replanted. You may be surprised at how some plants can survive with just a few healthy roots.

If you wish to retain more foliage the plants should be repotted into better soil and placed in the shade for a minimum of 2 weeks until the roots have recovered.

If there are few or no leaves the plant can be installed in its final location immediately. Set the plant in a hole at the proper depth. Carefully surround the roots with pulverized native soil (try to keep the roots close to the surface). Try to maintain some separation between the roots. Water repeatedly (minimum of 3 times) until it can be certain that the roots and surrounding soil are wet. Make certain the plant doesn't lean as the soil settles.

You may wish to supply a mild fertilizer at the same time. During the growing season expect plants to initiate new growth within 2 weeks of when the soil was purged.

When plants are put into better soil you will notice that the new leaves are larger and greener and that the plants suffer less from stress. When I have changed the soil on Bougainvilleas going dormant for the winter they awaken and become evergreen plants (like they should be) and bloom throughout the year. The Gardenias we have purged also begin to bloom all year!