



Green Thumb Secrets: Repotting Houseplants Respectfully

By Dr. Matthew Lisy, UConn Adjunct Faculty

Have you ever gone to someone's house and there were beautiful plants everywhere? When I was young, I always wondered how people did that. Others would comment that they must "have a green thumb." I thought, "surely there had to be some science behind this," and thus began my passion for plants!

The time of year can have a huge impact on the success or failure of a plant. Now is the perfect time to repot your houseplants as they are still in active growth. Repotting during the wintertime is generally not advisable as our plants are not growing as much, and the cooler indoor temperatures may not encourage new growth on freshly disturbed plant roots. There is also a temptation to repot into a much larger pot in order to save future repotting, and/or allow plants to grow bigger. The problem is that plants don't respond well to this. The excess soil tends to stay wet longer and is the perfect breeding ground for root fungus that can quickly kill your plant. Even if you let the soil dry between waterings, it still can stay wet for too long. If you increase the pot size, you only should go one size bigger.



Four newly acquired plants. The left front will be fine for a long time, the right front is perfect, and the back two need to be moved to larger pots (photo by M. Lisy).

Sometimes you don't need to put the plant into a bigger pot. Plants quickly use up nutrients in the soil in the pot, and salts tend to accumulate if regularly fertilized. It is very beneficial for

plants to swap the old soil for new media. There are several plants that prefer to be pot bound. African violets, Cape primroses, and spider plants are three common examples that bloom profusely when pot bound.

Another big secret is that different plants need different potting media. Fortunately, there are companies that manufacture different potting mixes based on the needs of specific groups of plants. If you have a lot of houseplants, it can be easier to buy an all-purpose plant mix that will work for most plants and modify it with additives for others. African violets, Cape primroses, and other gesneriads prefer a faster draining mix, so I add extra perlite. This allows the water to flow through the medium more quickly and simultaneously aerates the soil. Cacti and succulents prefer super-fast draining media with very little organic matter. I generally will buy a specifically prepared succulent mix for them.

Overwatering probably kills more houseplants than anything else. Root rots can easily set in, and many times when you notice you have a problem it is too late to do anything about. Each plant has its own watering requirements so you will need to research your specific plant. Some like to be kept moist; most like to dry between waterings, and a few like to rarely be watered. In general, it is best to dump out any water that accumulates in the tray underneath your plants a short time after watering. I prefer a dilute fertilizer with each watering. The worst combination is cold and wet soil in the wintertime. Plants tend to dry more quickly in the winter as we heat our homes. The humidity of the summer tends to let our plant's potting mixes retain moisture for longer periods of time.

Somewhat related to watering is humidity. Humid air can cause some plants to thrive, and others to rot. A humid basement is perfect for African violets, but terrible for desert cacti. A tray filled with pebbles and water under your potted plants can help raise the humidity in the air. Be sure the soil is not sitting in that water, however.

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