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Repotting Your Houseplants

Houseplants are much beloved by their owners. They're companions and stress relievers! They warm the owner's hearts with their varied colors, textures, and fragrances. Houseplants are living and breathing organisms bound by the pots they grow in. They need our constant care to keep them beautiful and healthy, and an important part of that care includes an occasional "repotting."

There are essentially three basic reasons for repotting your houseplant. As time passes your plant will become pot-bound when its roots have filled all possible spaces in the soil. Another reason to repot the plant is to refresh the soil. Potting soil deteriorates over time and may become clogged with precipitates from water and fertilizer. The third reason for repotting is to divide the plant when it becomes crowded with offset plants which compete for the limited space, water, and soil nutrients available.

Spring is always a good time to repot because it is a time when the plants are beginning a new growth cycle. The growth cycle is triggered by warmer temperatures and increasing daylight intensity and day length. This procedure begins with removing the plant from the pot. To do this place your fingers around the plant on top of the potting soil. Invert the potted plant and gently bump the rim of the pot on a solid surface. This will loosen the root ball so the plant will slide freely from the pot. Examining the roots to ensure they are healthy; they should be free of decay, fleshy and fairly white in color.

The next step is to loosen and separate the thick mass of tangled roots on the outer edge of the root ball (I call this "flaring the roots"). A slender screw driver or dull ice pick is a very useful tool for this job. Take your time and do try to avoid excessively damaging the roots (some root damage is okay and does not seriously harm the plant). When you've finished there may be some excessively long roots that should be trimmed back.

Repotting varies depending on the type of plant you have. Plants that are not divided are typically planted in a slightly larger pot (called potting up). Plants that are divided can be replanted into the same-size pot, or a smaller one depending on the size of the division. It's always better to use a high-quality potting mix when repotting your houseplant; it's especially helpful if this potting mix contains a slow-release fertilizer. After potting immediately water-in your plant and maintain evenly moist soil for several weeks until it is stabilized and has reestablished its root system.

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