

Proper potting techniques are easy to learn, so there's no excuse for strangling plants in too-small pots. To make things easy, set aside a corner of the basement or garage where you can store containers, fertilizers, and soil mixtures. Make a point to check all plants every spring; move those needing more space into larger pots.

The first thing to consider when getting ready to repot a plant is the type of container to use. This is especially important for plants, such as ferns, orchids, and cactus, whose roots need more air than some other plants.

The pots used most often are made from clay (or terra-cotta), ceramic, and plastic. All three work well, if you understand how they retain moisture. Clay and unglazed ceramic pots let a plant's roots breathe but also let moisture escape more quickly than plastic. This is an advantage for plants that need to dry out between waterings, such as cactus and other succulents.

Conditioning new clay pots is a step beginning gardeners often overlook--then wonder why their newly potted plants wilt, in spite of proper watering. The reason is that clay absorbs water. A pot that isn't conditioned tends to draw water out of the soil, robbing the plant. To avoid this, completely immerse the pot in a pail of water. Let it remain there until all bubbling and hissing stop. The hissing is barely audible, but you will hear it if you lean close to the water.

Plastic and glazed ceramic pots hold moisture longer; they are often preferred for plants that need a lot of water and like evenly moist soil, such as fittonia, pickaback plant, and miniature roses. This is a plus if you're a little forgetful about watering. Plastic pots are also ideal for small plants that tend to dry out rapidly. When using plastic pots for other plants, be careful not to water excessively. This can present problems when plants are potted directly in decorative glazed ceramic containers and jardinieres. To avoid waterlogging, pot the plant in a clay or plastic container with drainage hole, and set it inside the decorative receptacle. Or place a layer of gravel or pebbles in the bottom of the fancy pot before adding the soil and plant.

All standard-size pots and most plastic or ceramic pots have bottom drainage holes that let surplus water drain away and provide an entry for air into the lower root area. Before planting, this hole should be covered by a shard, a broken piece of pottery. This prevents soil from washing out along with the water. A small square of screening or a bottle cap may also be used.

Put a pot saucer under the container to catch any water running out of the hole. Use glazed ceramic or plastic saucers to protect wood surfaces or carpeting. To simplify moving large plants around the floor, choose saucers with built-in casters, too.

Most pots for hanging houseplants are plastic or ceramic; check for drainage holes and attached saucers before buying them.