

Remember, your plant will live or die depending on the soil you give it. Always use good soil that's moist--neither soggy, nor completely dry. It's difficult to pot a plant when the soil is powder-dry and equally hard to get the soil remoistened once it's in the pot.

You can buy packaged potting soil or mix your own using two parts garden loam; one part leaf mold or peat; and one part sand, perlite, or vermiculite. Sterilize parts of the mix that weren't sterile when purchased by spreading them in a baking dish or cookie sheet and cooking them in a 200-degree Fahrenheit oven for 45 minutes. Store the soil mix in a plastic bag or closed container to retain the moisture. Special soil blends can be purchased for certain plants with special characteristics, such as cactus, African violets, and orchids.

Sometimes the need for repotting is obvious: the plant wilts between normal waterings. Another sign is when new leaves are quite a bit smaller than older ones. Any plant growing spindly or not growing at all in a two- or three-inch pot is also a likely candidate. (However, remember that many plants are naturally dormant during the short days of winter.)

Repotting is in order, too, if you buy a small plant and discover you have to water it daily because the soil is too porous and won't hold the moisture.

It's normal for a few small roots to grow through the drainage hole, but when several large roots crowd their way through, you know they need more growing space.

Check plants that have been in the same container for two or more years to see if they're root-bound. Turn the pot and plant upside down, and grasp the base of the stem between your fingers. Tap the rim of the pot to remove the plant. If the soil ball is filled with roots, repot the root-bound plant in a slightly larger container.

Some plants, ferns and palms in particular, prefer being slightly root-bound and shouldn't be repotted too frequently.

Repot, also, if you receive a gift planter crowded with four or five young plants. They'll have a better chance for survival in individual pots. When the massed roots are free of the original receptacle, separate the plants gently. Put each plant in a four-inch pot, and water thoroughly. Keep all of them away from direct sun until they've recovered from the shock of transplanting.