

# Houseplants, Part 1: Liberate Your Root-bound Houseplants

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## Wintertime Gardening - Indoors

Gardening in the winter is easy and fun - if you have houseplants. Working with indoor plants requires no heavy boots. You may want to wear gloves to keep your fingers clean, but not to prevent them from freezing to any metal tools. Wearing layers of wool is unnecessary unless you're frugal with home heating. My cats button up their fur coats, and I wear my warmest hat, vest and scarf indoors through the cold months. .

Many plants cultivated indoors trace their roots to tropical and subtropical regions – places where you might like to be right now, instead of putting on yet another layer of wool or fleece. Technically “the tropics” includes the region between the Tropic of Cancer, 23½ degrees latitude north of the equator, and the Tropic of Capricorn, 23½ degrees latitude south of the equator. Many houseplants also grow vigorously outdoors in subtropical regions that rarely experience freezing temperatures. Places like south Florida are subtropical - not technically in the tropical zone, but still a lovely place to be this time of year.

Truly tropical species include dieffenbachia, peace lily, Chinese evergreen, pothos and dracaenas. At temperatures below 55F, they may show signs of chilling injury: dark, slimy, water-soaked patches on stems or main leaf veins. Keep these varieties in warmer rooms. Plants that survive in my underheated house include cactuses, succulents, ficus, ferns, nephthytis, palms and most flowering houseplants, tolerating temperatures as low as 45 degrees F.

## Time to Repot?

This is a great time of year to rejuvenate houseplants that have become leggy or lackluster. Flowering plants that aren't blooming, or are starting to lose lower leaves, may have outgrown their containers. If you see roots growing on the soil surface, or growing out of the drainage hole in the bottom, it's definitely time to repot - unless you have holiday cacti, jade plants, hoyas, most palms, and geraniums. These plants like being rootbound. Hoyas and geraniums will increase blooming in a cramped container. For other species, choose a new container only two inches larger in diameter than the current pot. A larger pot will contain excess soil, which can hold excess water and lead to root rot.

Prepare the plant for repotting by watering the soil so it's moist, not wet. To remove the plant from its current pot, hold the plant at soil level and turn it over. If the plant doesn't slip out, bump the container gently on a hard surface and be ready to catch the plant.

Examine the roots: healthy ones will be firm and white or light-colored. Cut off dark colored, squishy or smelly roots. They're a sign of root-rot, from over-watering, a blocked drainage hole or standing water beneath the container. Now you know to water less and ensure proper drainage.

If you find the roots growing in a crowded mass around the inside of the container, you'll need to prune them. Don't try to untangle the clump. Using a sharp knife, take one inch from the outside of the entire mass. Then make shallow cuts into the sides. Cutting back a large root will stimulate smaller feeding roots to replace it.



**Left** - This rootbound snake plant will benefit from root-pruning and repotting. **Center** – Carefully use a sharp knife to make vertical slits through tangled roots. Unlike many house plants, this snake plant has several large individual roots, each with its own foliage. These large roots can be cut away and potted separately. **Right** – Small roots now have their own pot, while the parent plant has room to grow in its new, larger container. **Photos by Christine Kinch / Skagit County Master Gardeners**

### **Choosing New Soil, Repotting Your Plant**

Avoid using potting soil with fertilizer blended in. Be aware that some plants prefer special soil mixes. Cactuses need extra sand for drainage, while orchids prefer a very loose, bark-based mix. Check plant tags for special instructions.

Don't cover the new pot's drainage hole, or use gravel at the bottom. This can slow drainage and encourage root rot. If you're concerned about soil seeping from the container bottom, cover the hole with a folded paper towel or coffee filter. Add some potting soil to the new container. Spread the plant roots, placing it on the soil. Make sure it's centered and upright. Fill soil in around the roots, until it's level with, or a bit higher than the container's edge.

To settle the soil around the roots, gently tap the container, or press lightly on the soil surface with your fingers. Water until you see drainage from the bottom. Once watered, the soil should settle to about one half-inch from top of the pot. The result should find the newly repotted plant at the same level it was in the old container with some new soil

under, around and on top of the roots. If you're pruned the roots, the plant will appreciate being kept away from strong light for a couple of weeks until it grows new ones.

**Next week:** Watering and fertilizing houseplants, controlling pests safely.

### **Orangeries**

The roots of indoor plant cultivation can be traced back at least 3,000 years, when Grecian women grew herbs indoors for the Festival of Adonis. Rooms of citrus plants grown indoors, called "orangeries," were common in palaces and estates of the Renaissance. Years of European imperialism led to botanical collecting expeditions in the tropics. In 1830s, wealthy Europeans had small greenhouses built, allowing their gardeners to replicate hot, humid tropical conditions and grow ferns, orchids and other exotic species. Many of them are still in cultivation as houseplants.

From the Smithsonian Institution's Indoor Tropicals Fact Sheet:  
[http://gardens.si.edu/horticulture/res\\_ed/fctsht/indtrop.htm](http://gardens.si.edu/horticulture/res_ed/fctsht/indtrop.htm)

### **RESOURCES:**

- "Repotting Houseplants," University of Arkansas Extension Service, <http://www.arhomeandgarden.org/landscaping/houseplants/repotting.htm>
- "Houseplants," Richard Jauron, Willy Klein, Iowa State University Extension Service: <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/article/yard-and-garden-houseplants>
- The Complete Houseplant Survival Manual, Barbara Pleasant, Storey Publishing 2006