

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
Date: February 27, 2005
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If you've spent your winter watching your houseplants become leggy or lackluster, this is a good time to give them a fresh start. Some container-grown plants like to be rootbound, including jade plants, hoyas, Christmas cacti, most palms, and pelargoniums (what many call geraniums). But plants that are refusing to bloom or starting to lose lower leaves might have outgrown their pots.

With your fingers cradling the plant at soil level, turn the pot upside down and knock it gently against a bench or other hard surface. Be ready to catch the plant, as it may drop out freely. If you see a mass of crowded roots with little soil on them, and certainly if the roots are girdling and circling the pot, it's time to replant. Choose a new pot only two inches larger in diameter. It's a mistake to choose a pot too much larger, as the extra soil will take up too much water. This can lead to root rot.

Once you've determined that your plant does need a new home, consider whether it also needs a good trim to stimulate growth. If you have a mature woody plant and you like its shape, it shouldn't need pruning. But plants like abutilon, scented geraniums, begonias and schefflera often benefit from a radical pruning. The best time to do this is at the start of the growing season or a bit before (late February or early March). Stick the plant back in its original pot and consider the new shape you want to give it. Always cut back to just above a node, where a branch meets a stem. If you look closely you may be able to see a small bud, called an axillary bud. This will sprout once the main shoot is removed. Some foliage needs to be left to allow the plant to manufacture food. If you're timid about pruning, start with taking half of the main stems back to a third of their size.

If the roots were circling around on themselves, you'll need to do some root pruning, too. This is best performed when the soil is moist, not wet. If the roots are a solid mass, slice them off with a sharp knife all at once, rather than trying to untangle each one. Cutting back a large root will typically stimulate smaller feeding roots to replace it. Up to a point the more of a plant that you remove, the more vigorously it will grow to try to replace what is lost. The plant will strive for a balance between the roots and shoots. If you cut too great a proportion of either the shoots or roots, the plant may die from the shock.

Don't cover the new pot's drainage hole, or use gravel or any other draining medium at the bottom. This can slow down drainage and encourage root rot. Fill in the new pot with soil medium so the plant will sit about an inch from the pot's edge. Keeping it in the center, cover the plant's roots by scooping and lightly patting soil around it. Firm the soil and knock the pot on a potting bench to settle the soil. Add until the soil is about half an inch above the base of the plant, and a half inch from the top of the pot. This allows room for watering. Add water until it drains out the bottom. If you've pruned the roots much, the plant will appreciate being kept away from strong light or heat until its new roots appear.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.