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**The Myth of Instant Landscaping:
*"How hard can it be to stick a plant in the ground?"***

The Myth

Recently I stumbled across a landscaping show on public television. The host, an enthusiastic and personable landscape designer, performed a landscape makeover on a neglected yard. The design and plant selections were fine, but the trouble began when he demonstrated his installation technique. A hole was dug to the same size as the container, the plant was removed and inserted directly into the hole, and soil was mounded up to the base of the trunk. It took all of 15 seconds, giving viewers the impression that plant installation is a snap and a beautiful landscape would result.

The Reality

It takes more than 15 seconds to properly install a containerized plant. Since unobstructed roots grow horizontally, it's important to direct them outwards upon installation. Pot-bound plants possess circling roots and unless straightened these roots will continue to circle, decreasing plant stability and increasing the likelihood that girdling and death will eventually occur. For this reason, the planting hole should be at least twice as wide as the container to allow proper root spread. A small mound of soil at the bottom of the planting hole will support the root crown and allow the plant to remain at grade (or slightly higher).

It seems like common sense to add the rich, well-drained potting material to the planting hole to give the plant a head start. In actuality, this contributes to one of the leading causes of post-installation plant death. The potting material is always more porous than the surrounding soil: hence, it dries out faster and needlessly stresses the roots of the plant. Next time you are inspecting a newly installed, suffering plant, stick your finger in the planting hole. It's probably pretty dry. Furthermore, even well-watered plants in these situations are slower to establish roots outside the planting hole because of this textural barrier.

A modified planting practice currently under study at UW involves removal of all container material before installation. Potting material is shaken off the root system, and in the case of pot-bound plants roots may need to be loosened in a bucket of water. It is critical to keep the roots moist from this point onward, as it is now a bare-root plant. An added bonus is that root defects can now be identified and corrected prior to installation. After proper positioning of the plant, soil is backfilled, water is added, and a thick topdressing of mulch completes the installation.

To install a plant following these guidelines takes longer, especially if the root system is a tangled woody mess. The long-term benefit, however, is a healthier plant that establishes quickly in the landscape and will require less aftercare than one that is simply popped and dropped.

The Bottom Line

- A planting hole should be at least twice as wide but no deeper than the root mass
- Container potting material needs to be removed from the root mass and composted – not added to the planting hole
- Roots need to be teased apart and directed outwards
- Pot-bound plants need to have circling roots straightened or removed

- Plants that are installed correctly will require less aftercare and have a longer life in the landscape

For more information, please visit Dr. Chalker-Scott's web page at <http://www.theinformedgardener.com>.