

# Planting - Pretty Basic?

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Last issue I talked about “Selecting the Right Plant for Your High Desert Landscape”. This issue is the next step or Part II of the process – how do you plant the plant? Most people feel that planting is pretty simple – dig a hole, put the plant into it, fill the hole with dirt, then water it. And all of that is true, but you may still kill your plant because planting’s not really so simple.

The following is the process I use from the time I leave the nursery or big box store until the plant’s in the ground and growing successfully.

## **Getting it home**

First I carry cardboard trays, like nurseries have, in the trunk of my car. I put my purchased plants into the tray that holds them best and try to wedge the plants together tightly. The trays help to reduce the fallout from loose dirt which occurs when I take a corner too fast in my car. For plants taller than my trunk lid I try to bend them gently to fit better. This works best for soft stemmed plants. If that fails or the stem is too woody, I wedge the offending pot at an angle to fit. If that doesn’t work, we go to plan B - which is putting it on the floor of the passenger side and tying it to the seat. What we’re trying to avoid is beating the plant(s) in the wind before getting it home. From the nursery I try to limit my number of stops, especially in the summer when plants can fry in the trunk before getting them home.

## **After it’s home**

Once the plants are home I put them in a shady location on the north or east side of my house and water them. They usually stay in this location for several days, watered each day. The purpose is to get the plants acclimated to my location and the outdoors. Then I wait until evening of the planting day to dig the hole. This is so the plant has overnight and shade to adjust to its new location which reduces the stress on the newly planted plant.

## **Digging the hole**

If the soil in the planting area is like concrete, I soak it and wait a day. I learned the hard way that soaking and waiting a day makes decomposed granite (our soil) a lot easier to dig.

Before I begin digging the hole, I place the plant in the yard, still in its original pot, to see how the plant’s going to look in its new location and to find the plant’s best side - remembering that the plant is going to grow and will need enough space for the mature size. I’ve also considered the location from the plant’s point of view. Is it too hot, too shady, too small, or too windy for this particular plant?

Next I take the pot and rotate it in a circle on the soil to leave a round mark, then I set the plant/pot aside. Now I’m ready to dig the hole, which should be more wide for root growth to the sides than deep. The diameter of the hole should be 2-4 times the diameter of the pot, and a little less deep than the pot height with sloping sides. I loosen the soil in this larger diameter area. When done planting the top of the soil in the pot should be level with the ground around. Also when I shovel the dirt from the hole the topsoil should be on the bottom of the mound of dirt. When done placing the plant, the soil should be put back into the hole in the same order it came out with the topsoil on top.

## **Planting**

I put water into the hole to see how it drains and to help keep the tiny root hairs moist once the plant goes back into the hole. You never know when you're planting on top of a boulder in which case the planting location needs to be adjusted. Then I turn the potted plant on its side and carefully roll it on the ground to loosen the sides of the plant from the pot. Next I turn the pot upside down holding onto the base of the plant while doing this. The plant should almost fall out of the pot. Still holding the plant by its base (now upright) I knock off excess potting soil from the shoulders and base, sometimes cutting an x or make one cut (butterfly wings) through the base if the roots are really tight. I place it in the hole and turn it so it looks right from the most frequent viewing angle/side. I take the fill dirt and return it to the hole, leveling the soil over the plant which should now be at ground level. I water the plant in adding more soil if it sinks just below ground level. If the plant ends up too high, I dig the hole a little deeper. If the plant ends up way too low, I add more soil in the bottom to raise the plant and replant. I keep the fine root hairs moist by wrapping the plant in damp newspaper if I need to adjust the hole depth or if it's really dry. I add mulch around the plant on top of the soil. This can be compost, pine bark (coarse shred to keep it from blowing away), or gravel if the plant prefers that. The mulch should cover the 2-4 times diameter area and should never be piled up against the stem or trunk of the plant. The "mulch volcano" allows pests and diseases to attack the stem. The final touch is to build a ring of mulch at the edge of the original pot diameter and water one final time. This ring keeps water over the roots and within the circle. It's less important for a flat location, but critical if I'm planting on a slope where water drains away downhill and misses watering the plant. The ring will need to be moved over time as the roots grow and the root hairs are farther from the stem.

I don't fertilize or use root stimulator on the plant since this can burn the little root hairs. Leaf growth is less important than root growth initially. I also don't add amendments like compost to soil unless 1) the plant needs better soil than our natural soil in which to grow and 2) the soil can be improved in the total footprint area (the area the plant will grow into). For trees, you can rarely ever improve the mature root size area and adding amendments in the hole creates a "pot" that the tree stays within rather than brave the tough outside world of our native soil. I do use compost as mulch (or just below the mulch) to provide "time release" nutrients to the plant.

## **Irrigating**

In the desert we can't put in a plant without considering how we'll get water to it. I'm going to assume drip irrigation is what we want so I place at least one emitter at the ring location, but under the mulch. If I've planted on a slope, I place the emitter up slope of the plant. As the plant's roots grow I move the emitter and sometimes add some more emitters. Remember roots don't grow on one side of the plant, but in a circle around the stem. The larger the final plant the more emitters are needed. And the larger the plant is when purchased, the more emitters are needed from the start. For trees, which don't do well on drip irrigation, I place lots of plants in the footprint area (both now and its future footprint) so as the tree grows there are already plants in place to help water it.

## **Daily care**

Am I done? No, now I need to watch it to make sure it stays alive. Initially I hand water it daily, especially if it looks wilted or starts turning brown. I may even have to create a shade structure for awhile. I continue this process and after the first week begin moving to a two day watering schedule. I always skip hand watering any day my automatic system runs because the plant's getting water. Usually after the first few weeks the plant looks like it can make it on its own. Now we're done.