

Home/Garden

Potting soils get plants off to fast starts

During the fall and winter we spend a lot of time paying attention to our houseplants — and buying a few new ones. Sometimes these young new plants will be small and old in a tiny pot. One of the first things we have to do is repot it. Providing a good potting soil will start our new plant on a healthy happy life.

Generally speaking we can say that a good potting soil must be porous enough to keep from constricting plant roots and allow water to drain, and it must be absorbent enough to hold some moisture for the roots.

Where can you get good potting soil? Certainly not in your backyard. Garden soil is probably too heavy, not to mention full of bugs and even soil borne diseases. You can sterilize it in the oven, but that's a lot of smelly trouble.

Every florist and supermarket has pyramids of plastic bags filled with general potting soil, succulent mix and African violet mix and other variations. I have never found any of these mixes much more successful than garden soil. After a couple of waterings they tend to pack down like a brick.

Fortunately, next to the bags of potting soil, you'll usually find bags of perlite, vermiculite and peat moss. With these you can doctor the potting soil to make a good mix yourself.

Vermiculite and perlite are inorganic compounds and look very similar. I prefer perlite because it will not break-down after several years.

Pat Leuchtman

Between The Rows



it will maintain its ability to aerate the soil.

If you had a supply of clean builders sand you could use this to lighten your potting soil instead of perlite. Peat moss will also provide organic material for your soil mix and it will also help to hold moisture so it doesn't drain away instantly.

A basic soil mix will be one third soil, one third vermiculite, perlite or sand and one third peat moss. If I were going to pot up a succulent or cactus, I would add a little extra perlite to insure that it would drain more quickly.

You can use clay or plastic pots, depending on your own preference, but there are benefits to each. I like the look of clay pots; the warm color and dull finish please my eye. Because water not only runs out of the bottom of the pot, but evaporates through the porous sides, clay pots are especially good for plants like cactus and succulents that need to dry out between waterings and can stand being dry for a while.

Plastic pots are not porous. They keep soil moist for a longer time so they are particularly good for plants that require nearly continuous mois-

ture like the spathiphyllum - and for gardeners who knew they won't keep a daily eye on their plant's watering

No matter what kind of pot you use, it must be crocked to insure drainage. Crocking simply means putting clean shards of old flower pots or pebbles in the bottom of the pot so that the drainage holes will not become clogged with soil. Drainage is vital for any plant, even one that likes a lot of moisture because if the soil gets waterlogged and stays that way, plant roots will rot and the plant will die.

You can reuse flowerpots many times, but in the interests of your plants' health, make sure you wash them well and sterilize them before using again. A solution of 10 parts water to 1 part bleach is all you need to sterilize the pot. Rinse well.

Once your plant is settled in its soil mix, in its pot, you'll have to water and fertilize it properly. It's obvious that the potting soil mix I have described is not very nutritious. Your plants will count on you to fertilize them during the growing season which is generally from March through October.

Houseplant fertilizer formulas will vary considerably. They will be identified by three numbers like 5-1-1 (fish emulsion) which lists the proportion of nitrogens (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K).

Foliage plants will benefit from a slightly greater proportion of nitrogen and flowering plants from a slightly greater proportion of phosphorus. Many brands will identify themselves as being good for blooming plants, African violets or plants in low light.

we are paying most attention to them, because that is usually a dormant season or season of slow growth.

A final reminder for those who are considering applying for the Cooperative Extension Service Master Gardener program. Applications should be in by Nov. 15.

Even if you don't think you are an expert but like to work with gardeners, this program is a wonderful opportunity to provide a valuable service while you have fun working with fascinating people. The training sessions will be held at the Extension office in Northampton from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. for 13 weeks beginning Jan. 12. Then the new Master Gardeners will volunteer 60 hours of time to staff the hotline, answering gardeners questions, hold soil testing clinics around the county and work on other horticultural projects.

If you have any questions call the Extension office 774-2902.



RUGG

3-DAY ONLY

This is time plants respond