

Wally's Weekly News 6th FEBRUARY 2010
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HOUSE PLANT and CONTAINER CARE

Looking after house plants and container plants during the summer can be a daily activity.

This is particularly so when it comes to the potted plant's water needs.

Outdoors container grown plants, once their roots fill the pot, will likely need watering every day and on some days, twice. Hanging baskets of plants outdoors are heavy users of water as they lose more moisture than containers sitting on the ground.

On the other hand indoor potted plants will likely need watering once or twice a week and in some cases even more frequently.

Outdoor plants in containers where a potting mix has been used as the growing medium, dry out quicker than ones that you have used compost as the growing medium.

This still applies if wetting agents have been applied to the potting mix.

Potting mix these days is mostly bark fines with slow release fertilisers added along with some lime and maybe other additives. Some potting mixes may still be peat based or have peat moss added.

Potting mixes are ideal for indoor plants but in my opinion hopeless for outdoor use.

The problem occurs when the potting mix dries out it creates a surface tension which does not allow water to penetrate. Thus when you water the water tends to go to the sides of the pot and then run out the drainage holes, on the way through the plant is able to gain some moisture.

The water is not able to penetrate into much of the mix, leaving areas of the mix and roots bone dry.

The result of this is that in next to no time the plant is drooping through lack of moisture and often parts of the plant's foliage will wither and die.

When friable purchased compost is used as the growing medium it retains water far better and will accept water much more readily than a pile of bark fines called potting mix or shrub & tub.

Even using a good compost mix on a hot day a plant may need two waterings dependant on the size of the plant and the size of the container.

There is also a danger of over watering when using compost in a larger container with a young plant that is still establishing. Care must be taken.

When you notice that the water you apply to a container runs out the drainage holes quickly and the plant's mix soon dries out again, then you can do one of two things to thoroughly moisten all the mix.

The first and the best method is to fill a large tub or bath with water and plunge the containers into the water and watch them bubble away. The more bubbles the more dry areas. When it stops bubbling then the mix is wet right through, lift and allow excess water to drain out and then place back in the original spot. Next time you come to water the water will stay in the mix.

(Note punnets of seedlings should also be plunged before separating them for planting out)

After a period of time, especially if the mix has dried out too much you will need to

plunge again.

Hanging baskets outdoors will fare better with a weekly plunge.

Being summer it is not a bad idea to treat all your indoor plants in the same manner, just do not do it in direct sunlight. Afterwards leave them in a shaded area to drain. They will likely only need one treatment if you are consistent with supplying their moisture needs. If you have very large containers that cannot be plunged then fill a bucket with warm water and add a good squirt of dish washing liquid to it. Agitate the water to make it soapy right through then slowly pour the contents over the top of the mix ensuring that all surface areas are covered.

The soapy water breaks the surface tension and allows water to penetrate.

This same method can be used on gardens and lawns for dry spots. (Bare spots of dried grass on lawns with a ring of healthy grasses around is often 'Dry Spot')

You can also reduce your potted plants water needs by spraying **Vaporgard** over and under the foliage.

One spray will last for about 3 months on foliage sprayed. It will also help reduce disease and insect damage.

Most disease damage to container plants is caused by over watering. You need to be aware as we head into autumn that the need to water is reduced. Do not carry on watering on the same frequency as you had to do in summer.

Powdery mildew can also be a problem as the weather cools and sprays of baking soda and **Raingard** will protect foliage from this problem.

Insects can get indoors and attack pot plants. Sometimes insect pests will get inside when bringing cut flowers indoors.

Always check the flowers you bring inside for pests.

The following applies to containers both inside and out.

One of the worst pests would be mealy bugs. These inhabit the root zone and then move up into the foliage. If you lift your plants out of their containers and notice white cotton wool like wisps on the inside of the container and on the outside of the growing medium then that plant has mealy bugs.

Neem Tree Granules can be scattered over the top of the mix to assist in control.

A solution of **Neem Tree Oil** at 25mls per litre of warm water can be watered over the granules when the medium is moist to strengthen the amount of Neem getting into the roots.

Indoors you may not like the sight or smell of the granules breaking down so you can cover them with additional mix or just water the **Neem Oil** in, without the granules.

Any of the pests in the foliage and stems should be sprayed with **Neem Tree Oil** at 15ml per litre of warm water. Do this outside in a shaded area such as in a garage, then leave to dry before returning to their spot.

The same spray treatment can be applied to any other insect pests such as scale, thrips, aphids etc.

If the plant has mites then a spray of **Liquid Sulphur** will deal to them. Do not use in conjunction with Neem Oil or if Neem Oil is present on the plant.

(That's **Liquid Sulphur** NOT Lime Sulphur a totally different spray that burns)

Plants that have filled their containers can either be re-potted into larger pots or alternatively lifted out of the pot and the bottom third of roots sawn off. Place fresh mix back into the base of the pot to fill the third that has been removed and pop the plant back

in.

With shrubs and fruiting plants this should be done every two years.

The plant will come away nicely after treatment and make new growth.

You can mix some **Rok Solid** into the bottom third of new mix to great advantage.

Problems ring me at 0800 466464 (Palmerston North 3570606)