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## CARING FOR NEW PLANTS

### **Plant as soon as possible.**

In the majority of cases, plants do better and are easier to care for when they are actually planted in the ground. Plants left in the container are much more likely to dry out quickly, and they cannot root out and get established until they are planted.

### **Know your soil.**

Clay is very common around here, and there are many different types of clay soil that you might have. Some clay soil is very rich in organic material, and so it is loose, workable, drains well, and will pretty much grow anything that you could ever want. Then you see the dreaded type which is so terrible that it might as well just turn into a rock and get it over with. Which type do you have? It's as easy as taking a shovel to your yard and digging a few patches of soil up to examine it. If your soil is very poor, you will have a tough time growing plants, and most things that you do plant will not live up to their potential. By spending a little extra and having your soil amended (or new soil brought in), you will experience a world of difference.

### **Check your drainage.**

Rotting plants can be common in the PNW, and can usually be avoided with a little forethought. Is the area you are planting in at the bottom of a slope where water drains to? Can you dig a hole, fill it with water, and the hole is still full of water several hours later? Does the area turn into a lake in the winter? These things are all bad news to many plants. Sometimes these problems are fixable, whereas sometimes you need to select plants that are tolerant of these conditions.

### **Analyze the area before planting.**

Be sure to look for any extremes that may adversely affect your plants. Does the area get really hot? Is there a tree nearby that gives some shade in the hottest part of the day? Is there concrete or rock nearby that may reflect heat onto your plants? Is the area naturally wet, or is it in an area that will get lots of irrigation consistently? These extremes can be hazardous, especially to new plants. Just because a plant prefers to be in full sun does not mean that it will thrive in a reflected heat situation. You can save yourself a lot of trouble by taking a little bit of time to check the area out and try to detect any quirks that may exist.

### **Plant with care.**

The hole you dig is essentially the plants only means of support in its first few critical months. Just digging a hole and throwing in the plant may work if you have *perfect* soil, but for the rest of us there is a little more to it.

- a) **Dig the planting hole twice as wide as the container the plant came in, or the rootball of the balled-and-burlapped (B&B) plant.** The hole only needs to be 1-1.5 times as deep as the container or rootball. Wide, but shallow planting holes will yield the best success.
- b) **Set the plant in the hole so the soil level is the same as it was in the original container/rootball.** Never plant any deeper than the original soil level (i.e. don't bury any of the plant's trunk/stem. If in doubt, or if you purchase a particularly moisture sensitive plant, plant a little bit higher and mound up.
- c) **Give your plant a good start.** Resist the urge to pamper your new plant by filling the planting hole exclusively with potting soil and all matter of goodies. It is usually not recommended to fertilize when first planting, as this can often do more harm than good as the new rootlets can be burnt by the fertilizer, unless using a starter fertilizer, which is formulated just to help plants establish.

If your soil is poor and heavy in clay you can mix a good organic compost with the existing soil that you've removed from the hole, but generally no more than 1/3 compost to 2/3 native soil and then

backfill. This will give your plant a little bit of an easier time while it is initially rooting out, while giving it a taste of the native soil that it will eventually have to deal with.

### **Water, Water, Water!**

The most critical thing for your plant in its first season or two is water. Until they get established, many plants are really handicapped in their ability to take up water and nutrients, simply because of the lack of an established root system. Until they establish, they are entirely dependent on you to provide them with all of the water they need for their survival. Unfortunately, our soil can sometimes be difficult in terms of watering. Clay soil, especially the really compacted type, is very stubborn at taking up water, especially if it has been allowed to dry out at all. Slow, deep watering is the best way to help your plants grow. The most effective means of watering is by supplying a low volume of water over an extended period of time, so that the water has time to soak into the soil deeply. A hose left running at a low volume by the base of the plant for an hour or so every other day will be much more effective than watering every day by simply standing over the plant with a hose and drenching the soil. Soaker or drip hoses also are effective, and are a worthwhile investment if you have a lot of new plants to water. Although they can be helpful, **do not rely on a sprinkler system to care for your plants for the first year**. Most sprinkler systems simply do not work in a manner that allows sufficient water penetration into the soil to adequately support first year plantings. If a sprinkler system is used, it is often necessary to subsidize that water with some extra soakings, especially as the weather warms up. It is up to you to monitor your plants to make sure that they are getting the care that they require – a lot of potential damage can be avoided by paying close attention to your new plants - especially in hot weather.