

Planting Basics for New Canberra Gardeners

Selecting the plants

Plants grow best in soils they are suited to, so it is critical to find out not only what grows best in your area, but also **where** they grow best (this includes soil type and position; for instance, some grow better in swampy areas, others on the tops of hills). Remember to include shrubs and small plants because these understorey plants are really important for food and shelter for native animals.

Planting

1. Before planting, soak the seedlings in their containers in a tray of water for a few minutes
2. Dig a wide hole, and incorporate a small amount of cow manure or planting compost, or stones, coarse sand, granite and gypsum if your soil is very hard clay, with existing soil in the bottom of the hole
3. If you have clay soil, 'roughen' the sides of the hole for better root penetration (see our pamphlet 'Clay soils in Canberra' for more advice)
4. Fill the hole with water (before the plant goes in) and allow to drain
5. Trim any roots protruding from the bottom of the plant container
6. Gently remove the plant from the pot, holding the root ball, not the trunk of the plant
7. Place the plant in the hole and backfill with the remaining soil you dug out for the hole
8. After planting, backfill to the same level as the surface of the potting mix (i.e. do not bury the plant any deeper than it was in the pot).
9. Shape the soil surface to make a shallow depression 3cm around the plant. This will collect water from rain and hand watering. The depression should hold at least half a bucket of water.
10. Water in gently, up to half a bucket per plant depending on soil dampness.
11. Check that roots are not exposed when watering. Add more soil if necessary.
12. Mulch lightly around the plant. Remove weeds that may compete with the plant for water. Avoid heaping mulch against the plant as this can bring on stem rot and insect attack.

Maintenance

In clay soil, water once every week to 10 days for the first summer, then less frequently after that unless drought conditions apply

In sandy or loamy soil, you may need water once a week - half a bucket of water or more. In very hot weather, water every 4-5 days for the first month until the plants are established. This **does not** apply to loamy soil that has been imported and dumped on top of clay.



The clay below will hold moisture underneath the plant and can rot new roots. Instead of increased watering, mulch well to retain soil moisture close to the surface.

Water early in the morning or late in the evening to reduce evaporation.

In winter soil stays moist for longer due to cooler temperatures and heavy dews, always check the soil before watering so not to over water and drown your new plants.

Less frequent deep soaking is better than more frequent light watering. A good soak encourages plants to develop strong, deep roots, which eventually reach the watertable. Shallow, light watering encourages roots to grow towards the surface, leaving them vulnerable to wind and dry periods.

In clay soil, be careful not to overwater. Clay soil traps moisture and too much water will cause roots to rot.

It is best not to stake plants. Staking can alter growth shape and encourage smaller root systems. When you have to stake a tree, use three stakes and soft material like an old stocking, forming a triangle around the stakes, not tied to the tree. Remove the stake as soon as the plant will stand upright on its own.

Surround the plant with a tree guard or milk carton with the bottom cut out. This will create a humid atmosphere around the plant.

If you decide to buy new soil to add to your garden beds, take care when choosing your soil mix. There are many soil mixes on the market made from compost, mushroom compost, etc that can be very strong and can change the pH of your soil. These mixes are useful for vegetables, annual plantings and some 'gross feeders' such as fruit trees, but can cause root rot, overfeeding, and nutrient toxicities in many plants. Some suppliers will tell you that their mixes are pH neutral, but this has not always proven to be the case, and many acid-loving plants such as Camellias and Azaleas can suffer in these soil mixes.

If you are buying soil for Australian plants, choose a mix that has more 'bulk' than nutrient. A mix of granite, rock, sand and soil is useful. Many Australian plants can rot and suffer from nutrient toxicities in rich soils (they have adapted to very poor nutrient soils and are not used to it!).

Tip prune in spring and summer for a bushy, healthy plant. This will encourage vigour, fresh new growth, and can often increase the lifespan of your plants. This is done by simply cutting off old flowers, and trimming off the tips of the stems lightly with sharp, clean secateurs. This is a very important practice, and should be carried out even when your plants are very young and small.

PLEASE NOTE all plants behave differently in varying soil types, watering systems, soil mixes, exposure to the elements, and slope/ soil level variations. This is intended as a general guide to many of the more frequently grown plants in the region.