

## Re-potting Tips

By DR. SMITH

When should I re-pot? How big should the new pot be? What planting mix should I use? How do I make sure my plant doesn't freak out in the process?

If you've asked these questions before, you're not alone! While there's no one-size-fits-all method for re-potting houseplants, there are a few reliable guidelines I'd love to share.

**First up: how do you know when it's time to re-pot?** Root-bound plants often mimic signs of underwatering—they droop quickly and may have yellowing or browning lower leaves. In more extreme cases, you might even see the pot crack or bulge under pressure. That's because of turgor pressure (imagine water pressure in a closed hose), which can build up as roots push outward. Time to check those roots!



*Non-root-bound English Ivy.*

Carefully remove the plant from its pot. Ideally, you'll see a healthy mass of white roots reaching downward, with at least one-third of the soil still visible around the edges. If the roots are tightly circling the pot with no soil in sight, it's time to size up.

Some plants actually *prefer* to be slightly root-bound—peace lilies, spider plants, snake plants, jade plants, African violets, and a few others. Only re-pot these when you notice significant leaf yellowing or

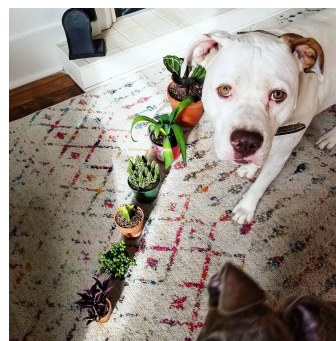
wilting without other signs of disease or pests. Also, re-potting is best done in spring or summer, when the plant has enough light to support new growth.



*Happy, but root-bound Peace Lily.*

**Choosing the right pot:** One of the most common re-potting mistakes is upsizing *too much*. A pot that's too big retains moisture longer than roots can use it, creating a breeding ground for rot and pathogens. Imagine your plant is a kid who just outgrew a kiddie pool—you don't want to throw them into the ocean!

Unless your current pot is *tiny*, stick to increasing diameter by just 1–3 inches. For example, if your plant is in a 3.25" pot (about 0.5 quarts), don't jump to a 6.5" pot (2.5 quarts). Go up gradually. Shape, depth, drainage, and material also matter—but we'll save that for another issue.



*Pot-size ladder. Pups for scale.*

**What about potting mix?** It's tempting to grab

a standard *all-purpose* houseplant mix—but not all plants have the same needs. Rather than buying a different mix for every type of plant (hello, dusty bags in the garage), I like to customize a basic mix using common additives.



*Good ingredients = happy plants.*

Here are my go-to additives:

- **Perlite** – Improves drainage, sheds water quickly
- **Vermiculite** – Retains moisture for longer periods
- **Sand** – Increases drainage, holds no moisture
- **Coconut coir** – Improves aeration, a sustainable alternative to peat

(I used to use peat moss more often, but after learning about the environmental costs—habitat destruction and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions—I made the switch to coir. It works great!)



*2/5 all-purpose + vermiculite, 1/5 perlite = tropical dream.*

**How to choose the right mix:**

- *Tropical or water-sensitive plants* (e.g., vines, moisture-loving varieties): Use more **vermiculite**.
- *Semi-succulents* (e.g., Peperomia, Sedum): Blend of **vermiculite** and **perlite**.
- *Succulents and root-rot-prone plants*: High **perlite** content with added **sand**.
- *Epiphytes* (e.g., orchids, Dischidia, Monstera): Extra **coconut coir** for airflow and to mimic their natural growing environment.



*2/5 all-purpose + perlite, 1/5 vermiculite = semi-succ sweet spot.*

**Minimizing plant stress during re-potting:** Water your plant about an hour before re-potting. This reduces breakage during handling. **Exception:** Sedum succulents like Burro's Tail—water makes them shed leaves more easily, so let them dry out first.

After removing the plant from the old pot, gently loosen the root ball. Tease out some soil and separate the roots. Don't panic if you break a few—this often encourages new growth.

Your root ball should now look like someone with bedhead. Place an inch or two of fresh mix in the bottom of the new pot, hold your plant at the right height (surface just below the lip), and fill around the roots. Give it a gentle pat—think “friendly cat,” not “firm mattress.”

Finish with a thorough soak and return your plant to a spot with the right light conditions. You did it!

**Until next time: remember to stop worrying and learn to love the greenery!**