



March heralds the time for making sure those houseplants have happy and roomy homes. No, I'm not talking about buying a bigger house. Let's do this the easy way - just take a look at your houseplants and the container homes you have them in. More than likely, if you can't remember the last time your houseplants were given a fresh new container and potting mix - they probably need them. There are some easy steps that will help you walk through accomplishing a great plant renovation and repotting whether you are an experienced pro or a relative plant newbie. And in the process, you will get a good sense of the overall health of your plants.

The first step is to figure out what plants you have. Give yourself a bit of time to get reacquainted with your plants. If you don't know, find out the names of the plants you have by going to garden centers that have a good, healthy selection of houseplants and look for a similar plant. Often the staff can help you better if you bring a leaf sample in - just make sure it doesn't have insects crawling all over it! Write down the name and look it up either on-line or at a local library. Or, if you really love those houseplants you may even want to invest in a good guide to houseplant care and culture - it will definitely pay for itself over time. These resources will provide the necessary information about the climate, soil types, dividing, bloom periods, and fertility needs. Once you figure out what you have, it is much easier to figure out what needs to be done.

Step two - after you have read up on your houseplants, assemble the appropriate materials. These may include a clean pot with a catch tray (optional), potting media, tools (trowel and a pruner), water, inexpensive plastic sheeting (optional but I'm quite messy and these make clean up real easy), disinfectant, some small squares of loosely woven fabric (cheesecloth or gauze work well) to cover the drain holes, and a waste container. Clean pots can be either new or old as long as it is possible to sanitize them. When choosing a container, look for one that is between 1" and 2" larger than the current one. If you go too big, the plant will respond with excessive root growth, slowing the top growth, impacting the balance of roots and leaves - which will cause the plant some stress. Be sure to look for containers with shape and drainage holes appropriate for your plant's needs. The needs may vary with each plant - deep or shallow roots; dry soil to well drained to wet feet; high humidity or dry air. Yes, you can reuse containers, some more successfully than others. Used clay pots are easy to sanitize in a couple of different ways. Soak them in a ten percent bleach solution for about half an hour or if unpainted, they can be baked in a

200 degree Fahrenheit oven for about half an hour. With either method, let them safely sit until dry or cool to the touch before using. Plastics are a common material for plant containers as they are generally lightweight and often inexpensive. If you have a used plastic container, chemical sanitizing techniques are not particularly effective on this material - and please don't bake anything plastic! You can try to reuse them but beware that if diseases are present, you will just be perpetuating the problem. Choosing potting media can be tricky if you don't understand your houseplants. Go to the garden center with your list of plant names so that you buy the right mix for each plant. The various potting mixes will be labeled for the plants best served - yes, there can be substantial differences in the materials used that can greatly impact the life or death of your houseplants. Don't skimp on the potting media. Your plants need the best base to grow in to maintain good health. As always with tools - be sure to sanitize them before use and between plants. You may even want to sanitize while working on individual plants if they are sick enough. (Okay, I'll be honest here. If they are that bad, and not irreplaceable family heirlooms, THROW THEM OUT.) Using a ten percent bleach solution or some spray disinfectant will work great.

Step three is where you can start getting your fingers in the good stuff by getting the plant out of the old container. After covering the work surface, get out your first victim, I mean plant. Before you start pulling it out of the container, take a good look at the overall health - is the leaf color consistent and healthy? Again, knowing your plant material will give you an idea of what the foliage should look like. It may actually be variegated and not pathetically sick, like you thought. Cut away and dispose of any leaves that look dry or unhealthy. And now is a good time to prune out and dispose of any branches on those woody stemmed plants that need a bit of work. The same techniques are used as for outside plants. Remove those branches that are dead, crossing, or rubbing. Now move in for structural pruning. Look for those branches that are growing toward the center of the plant and remove them just above nodes growing in an outside direction - or you may even want to remove them completely. Once those are taken care of, you can begin to prune for aesthetics. (Most of the time we don't take off enough of the plant, which causes them to shade out their own lower levels, not getting enough light to grow properly throughout the entire structure. Trust me, most of the time the plant will do much better if you feel guilty by the time you are done pruning.) With pruning and trimming out of the way, and all debris disposed of, it is now time, finally, to remove the plant from the old container. Turning

the container on its side, gently and firmly grasp the plant and slide it out. You may have to wiggle it a bit to loosen the roots and potting media. After it is out, and while it is still on its side, look at the root system. If the roots wind around in the shape of the container – it is definitely time to repot, even if your plant likes to be potbound. Take another look at the roots, checking for smell, color, and condition. Healthy roots will be creamy white to white in color, look full and moist with minimal dry browning and no unpleasant smell. Often the potting mix around the roots will be hard and not very plentiful. Gently loosen whatever is there and moisten very slightly. Depending on the quirks of your plant, some root pruning may be in order. If there are brown root areas, cut them off with a disinfected pruner (or plant scissors, a handy little bugger) and dispose of the debris immediately. If the roots are wound considerably, pruning them back hard will help to fit the plant system healthily into the new container and provide a bit of growth stimulation. Do not put a wound up root system back into a container. It doesn't do you or the plant any favors.

Guess what? In step four, you get to repot the plant! But, before you begin, make sure that you have disposed of all plant debris removed up to this point. If your plants appeared kind of sickly, you may also want to disinfect the work area before you continue. Get out your new container and check to make sure that the drainage holes are clear and plentiful enough to discourage standing water. Place a small square of the loosely woven, permeable fabric over the hole(s) to prevent the potting mix from washing out. Pottery shards are often recommended but will sometimes dislodge and cause the hole to clog. Hold the plant in the new container to get an idea of how much potting media is needed in the bottom to bring the plant crown to sit about ½" below the rim level. Fill in the appropriate amount of media and place the plant in. While holding the plant in place, fill potting media around the root zone and up the sides, gently firming as you go to eliminate excessive air pockets. (Be judicious in your use of pressure as too much can cause compaction around the root zone, potentially causing problems for the plant.) When you have filled the container about half way up, water gently to moisten the potting media and continue to fill to about ½" below the rim, or whatever level the plant crown ends up at. Water gently again to moisten and remove some of the air pockets. Allow the media to settle and add more as needed to get to crown level. Plan to allow at least ½" between the potting media level and the rim to make watering easier. Water again until the water runs out of the drainage hole(s) and allow the container to drain for a few minutes or until the water ceases to flow out of the bottom – you may want to do this part in the sink. Place the container into the catch tray and put back into its preferred environment. Voila – repotting completed! Clean up the work area, disinfect your tools, and you're almost done.

The last thing to consider is fertilization. For those blooming houseplants, you should have been giving them an appropriate fertilizer throughout the winter months. If that kind of escaped the winter care list – just start them back on scheduled fertility treatments the next time you water. For those non-blooming houseplants, March is the time to again start up the growing season fertilization and watering schedule. Never use more fertilizer product than is recommended on the label. More is not better. Not only does it have the potential to burn the plants, but it is also illegal.

Remember - it may be necessary, and kinder, to say goodbye to houseplants with problems beyond human intervention. Just be a good soul and help those plants take a gentle leap into the dumpster. Don't feel bad, so many plants so little time.