

TRANSPLANTING ANNUALS

Most gardeners begin their love of gardening with annuals. Planting them is therefore thought to be child's play, and that is true, so long as one follows certain simple but sometimes overlooked practices. Here are the essential steps for getting annuals and other seedlings off to a good start.



1. Prepare the ground

No matter how good your soil, it can always be better. Take this opportunity to fluff the soil by spading or troweling it until it is crumbly. And always mix in a generous helping of compost or lightly wetted peat. Finally, rake the soil to a smooth surface. Work your soil only when it is moist, but never when it is sodden, as you are likely then to make bricks, not a flower bed.



2. Handle seedlings gently

Thoroughly water young plants about two hours before transplanting, so that the rootballs are moist but not soppy (which can cause them to tear apart). Tip them from their plastic cell-pack gently, disturbing the roots as little as possible. It is a myth that annuals profit from having their roots roughed up, a practice fatal to

many. Do not hold any annual by its fragile neck, but—like the baby it is—cup its bottom.



3. Plant at the proper depth

Annuals prefer to be planted with the top of the rootball just at soil level, and burying them deeper may cause fatal rot. Scoop out a hole only slightly larger than the root mass of the transplant. Tuck, rather than ramming or mashing, soil around the roots, making sure that they are in contact with the surrounding earth on all sides.



4. Water and Feed

Even if the soil is decently moist, water new transplants gently, as this settles the earth, creating vital contact for questing young roots. A liquid fertilizer at half or quarter strength acts as an encouraging stimulant, but withhold stronger fertilizers—granular 20-20-20 or the like—until plants are well established.

5. Pinch Eager as one is for flowers, there is no annual that will not be better off for a pinch at transplant time, which encourages bushiness and more flowers later. Always pinch out that first precocious bud, though two or four leaves must be left. ♡