

Planttalk's Planting and Hardening Off of Transplants

Bedding plants for flowers and vegetables are available as seedlings, known as transplants. They're sold by Garden centers, nurseries and through the mail, or they can be grown in a bright window or under fluorescent grow-lights.

When buying transplants, the condition of the plant is often more important than its variety. A good transplant would be at least as wide as it is tall. It should have a stocky stem with dark green, thick leaves and, if possible, it should not be flowering. Choose the best, healthiest plants that are free of disease and Insects. Avoid any neglected plants. Use caution when buying transplants after a cold, wet spring because they may not have been sold quickly enough. Avoid tall, thin and pale plants that have not received enough light or water.

The outdoor environment can be very harsh for a transplant. So, harden the transplants before planting to increase their chance of survival. Place them outdoors where they will receive direct sunlight and some wind for a few hours each day for a week. Gradually lengthen the amount of time outside each day. Move the plants inside at night if temperatures drop to near freezing. Keep them watered and plant them as soon after hardening as possible.

Remember to read plant tags for the correct spacing between new plants. If planted more densely than recommended, bedding plants may not develop fully and may be more susceptible to Insects and diseases because they are competing for air, water, nutrients and sunlight.

Prepare the soil for planting by adding a one-inch layer of organic material and till it in to a depth of six to eight inches. Inspect the seedlings and carefully remove them from the pots. The soil around the plant should be moist. If the plant is pot-bound, with roots encircling the outside of the soil, gently score the root ball on all sides with a sharp knife. Try to keep the root ball intact and make only shallow cuts. These cuts will encourage rooting.

Dig a small hole for the seedling. Place the plant deep enough in the soil to cover the top of the root ball with one-quarter of an inch of soil. If the top of the root ball is exposed, the plant will dry very quickly and could die. Move soil around the plant and firm the soil, but do not pack it down.

Water with a gentle spray to wet the entire area without puddling or eroding the soil around the transplants. Keep plants watered to develop healthy, large, leafy plants that have deep roots that can withstand the heat of summer and bloom or produce a bountiful harvest.

Source: Planttalk Colorado - sponsored by Colorado State University Cooperative Extension, Denver Botanic Gardens, and the Green Industries of Colorado. For additional information on Gardening, see www.ext.colostate.edu/ptlk