

in the garden

BY STEPHEN AND KRISTIN PATEGAS

Keeping Them Alive



Kristin and Stephen Pategas

A human can only last about three to five days without water. That may be an optimistic number here in Florida during our summer heat. Plants newly installed in the garden won't last even close to that long. Since it's the roots that take in moisture, these plants, although eager to get into your garden, are at a disadvantage. Their contained root mass fresh out of a nursery pot is small compared to their foliage, which transpires water. Meanwhile they are used to being watered multiple times a day in the nursery.

The critical task we face after they are properly planted is to keep them healthy while we wean them off of frequent watering. This period is called the establishment period. As the roots creep out of root balls into the surrounding soil they can obtain moisture from a greater area. Research has shown amending the soil with organics is not needed. In fact they may act as a barrier for emerging roots and slow their establishment. To significantly improve poor soil conditions and increase water retention, replace or heavily amend soil over a wide area since as plants mature, their roots extend well beyond the edge of their foliage.

The coarse sandy soil in most of our gardens encourages water to drain straight down with minimal horizontal movement. Wide coverage of the root zone with water is critical. New plants in the ground benefit from a ring of soil on the outer edge of the root ball, not beyond it. The elevated soil creates a saucer to concentrate water directly onto the root ball.

Place the soil saucer at the root ball edge (at plant label).



Right after planting, fill the saucer at least twice. Then water at least once a day as roots grow. Use a watering wand with a shutoff to provide a gentle water

Remove the soil saucer after establishment.

flow that preserves the saucer. Check the plant at least once a day and if there is any wilting make sure the root ball is moist. Sometimes the hot sun can cause a temporary wilt of the foliage even when the soil is moist. Don't worry, once the sun goes down the leaves will return to normal. Maintain a one inch layer of mulch within the saucer to keep out weeds and hold in moisture.

The need for water and length of establishment for each plant depends upon the growing season - warm versus cool months and the type and age of the plant. Establishment can take weeks or months for small plants and years for larger trees. The larger the tree is the longer the required establishment period.

After establishment remove the soil saucer. Do not spread the excess soil on top of the root ball or against the trunk or stems. Plants with soil over their top roots will not thrive. When watering those new plants on a hot day please make sure you are well hydrated. They need you in order to survive and we'd hate to lose a gardening reader. 🌿

Kristin and Stephen Pategas design landscapes and garden at their home and business Hortus Oasis in Winter Park. Contact them at garden@hortusoasis.com and visit www.hortusoasis.com and www.pategaionplants.com. All photography by Stephen G. Pategas/Hortus Oasis

