

## DO YOU PUDDLE?

*Andrew Haynes*

Given that water is such a basic requirement for plant growth, it is quite surprising that most 'how to' books devote so little space to the subject. Considering the level of general ignorance, it's a wonder that so many plants survive watering regimes of pathetic little sprinklings on the one hand, to soil-scouring deluges on the other. I hope I'm not trying to teach grannies how their eggs should be sucked here, but it doesn't hurt to re-examine a method that is perhaps more relevant for a changing climate.

The ancient art of 'puddling in' seems to be a disappearing one that is no longer taught in the local horticultural colleges. I always tell my trainees that it is one of the most important techniques that they will ever learn. This is the method to use when transplanting from pots of any size or any plant with or without a root ball.

First, water the plant well, or soak it if bare-rooted. Then dig a hole to the exact depth of the plant and at least twice the width of the root ball/root. Transfer the excavated soil to a barrow (or bucket), and thoroughly break it up. Add nothing to this except a little bone-meal; any compost or manure is better applied as a surface mulch after planting. Then flood the hole with a large volume of water from a bucket or from the top of a watering can (forget the spout, it is too slow).



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**Puddling in a transplanted plant**

The plant is then immediately plunged into the flooded hole, which is swiftly backfilled with the prepared soil before the water drains away. Large plants may be placed in position before flooding, as they can be difficult to manoeuvre. As the water drains, it sucks the soil down around the plant; there is no need to firm it in, so don't! The aim is to have a layer of saturated soil in intimate contact with the root ball and a layer of dry soil on top, to slow evaporation. The absence of a wet soil surface around a new planting helps make it less attractive to slugs.

In many cases this will be the only watering the plant needs; certainly most plants won't need watering again for a couple of weeks, and root development will be improved if you can avoid watering for this time. Instead, try shading plants during the hottest part of the day. I have, on occasion, lifted plants treated in this way for comparison with plants watered from above and found the puddled plants to have far more fresh root growth. Two or three years on, puddled plants will still display more vigour than those conventionally planted, which really emphasises the importance of correct planting. Christopher Lloyd was a great advocate of puddling; it even enabled the transplanting of asters in full flower from nursery bed to border - yes, you really can get away with it!

Planting time presents the only opportunity to put water where it is really needed, so don't miss the opportunity: get puddling!

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