

IN THE GARDEN WITH MR. GREENJEANS

by Randy Arnowitz

Randy – Mr. Greenjeans – resides in a potting shed with 200 orchids and his golden retriever “Peaches.” He enthusiastically welcomes your gardening questions; address them to greenjeansmr@verizon.net.

Penetrating the Plant Root Problem

Dear Mr. Greenjeans,

This might be a dumb question but I’ve always wondered about this. Can I use regular ol’ garden soil in my outdoor containers rather than potting soil? I’ve noticed that some of the new potting soils on the market are quite expensive. What do you think?

Signed,
Penny Pincher on Picacho



Fox Farm makes a great potting soil and, even for penny pinchers, it’s worth the extra money

Dear Penny Pincher,

When I’ve asked that question of gardeners and nursery-type folks I’ve gotten the following answers: garden soil gets too compacted in a pot; garden soil doesn’t drain well in a pot; plant roots can’t penetrate the garden soil; not enough nutrients; too many nutrients; don’t know, but it just ain’t right; I see nothing wrong with using it.

Most of these answers don’t really make sense to me. Like, why would plants in the garden do okay in garden soil but not container plants? Why can plant roots in the garden penetrate garden soil but not when they’re in a container. Why does garden soil get compacted in a pot but not in the garden? Since I don’t understand the answers to any of these questions, I’ll just tell you what I think.

For one thing, when I see a plant growing (or trying to grow) in a pot of garden soil it seems to lack organic matter and therefore probably doesn’t retain moisture as well as potting soil. I’d say that, generally, store-bought potting soil has more organic matter than garden soil.

It seems that when a pot of garden soil has been watered it looks mucky and does not look porous or well draining.

Also I’ve noticed that when garden soil dries out in a container it appears cracked, parched, lifeless and uninhabitable. Need I go on? I’d say go with what your gut says. Better yet, go with what *my* gut says and it’s saying buy the potting soil and don’t use garden soil for your container plants.

Also, remember that eventually potting soil loses what little nutrients it has and frequent fertilizing is essential for your potted plants to do well.

Dear Mr. Greenjeans,

Y’know, sometimes I think your name should be Mr. SmartyPants instead of Mr. Greenjeans. In one of your columns you said that you could cut back a really old, woody star jasmine and it would come back. Well, I listened to your advice and last winter I cut mine

down. I’m still waiting for it to come back and I suspect the thing died on me. What do you think went wrong?

Signed,
Not Your Biggest Fan on Fernald

Dear Not Your Biggest,

First of all, I’m sorry for your loss. I can certainly relate. I recently had to put a beloved Swedish ivy into the compost pile because of a persistent mealy bug infestation. Time really is the great healer, though.

Getting back to your star jasmine. I think you would’ve had a more successful outcome with your plant had you cut it back in the spring like I did with mine. Better luck next time. Oh, and again. My heart goes out to you.

Dear Mr. Greenjeans,

I saw what I thought was a clivia in someone’s garden but the darn thing had yellow blooms instead of those bright orange ones. Was I seeing things or do they make them in yellow? If they do come in yellow do you know where I could get one? Also, are they as easy to grow as the orange ones? Thanks.

Yours,
Color Blind on Coronada

Dear Coronada,

You did indeed see a yellow-flowering clivia. Nice huh? These have been available for a few years now and you should be able to pick some up at most retail nurseries in Santa Barbara. If not, I’m sure they’d be happy to order them for you. Expect to pay quite a bit more for them than you would the orange ones.

These yellow bloomers are as easy to grow as the orange-flowering types and similarly, will bloom in the shade where color is often needed.

Also, like its orange cousin, they are drought tolerant once established and even full morning sun can burn the tender, dark green foliage.

But wait, there’s more: some of the yellow ones are fragrant. *My*

EVERYBODY WANTS TO LIVE... *Buy the Beach*
www.BuyTheBeachSB.com