

## Planting in dry shade

### Sue Catchpole

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After autumn planting, plants become established and can put on a dazzling display even in a dry garden.

I used to live on a half-acre plot on a steep slope in the Cheshire Gap. The location meant we had quite low rainfall compared to that just five miles away, with an average of 28 inches a year. The soil was deep, neutral, heavy clay which dried out and was as hard as concrete throughout the summer months, when very long, 2–3-inch-wide cracks would appear. Every three years, in winter, I mulched each bed with either my own compost (despite some weed seeds) or leaf mould. After about 15 years I found that the cracks no longer appeared.

Anything planted in the spring was dead by the end of summer, so I began to plant in the autumn, from mid-September through to November (or even December, if it was mild).

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Here is my method for planting in dry conditions:

1. Submerge the plants, still in their pots, in a bucket of water and leave them until no more bubbles appear from the surface of the compost or they sink to the bottom. Then take them out and leave them to drain.

2. Dig a suitable planting hole about two to three times larger than the plant and pour into the hole 4–5 litres of water and leave it to drain. If the water disappears fairly quickly then repeat with another can of water, and again if necessary.



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3. Remove the pot and place the plant in the hole and carefully put any damp soil up close to the roots and finish by putting the surrounding dry soil on the upper surface so that the moisture is held close to the plant's roots. I wouldn't water the top soil.



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If the soil or the weather is particularly dry, a depression can be scooped out around the stem so that it will gather water or rain, which will soak through to the roots. Alternatively, there are cheap plastic watering gadgets that fit into the neck of a plastic bottle with a spike that goes into the ground alongside the plant. If the bottom is cut off the bottle, when it is turned upside down it can easily be filled with water which then percolates down to the roots. A plastic bottle can also be used at planting time by removing the cap, cutting the bottom off and then planting the bottle, again upside down. Clear plastic bottles can be relatively discreet.

I found that if I bought plants which were growing in peat compost their roots wouldn't grow into my clay soil, so I would remove as much of the compost as possible, repot them in my own compost mix, and grow them on to be planted into the ground at a later date.

Finally, remember that Beth Chatto had not long planted her gravel garden when there was a serious drought and all her plants were wilting. She just cut all the herbaceous plants down to the ground, and they reappeared when the rains finally came. 🌱

**Sue Catchpole** loved her hillside garden but she's now enjoying a smaller, flatter space in suburbia where she's making a garden with pots on the sunny side of the house, and on the other a small garden with full shade in winter and part shade in summer.