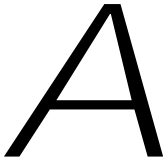


The Basics



Acquiring New Plants Safely

It is common for a new grower to become very enthusiastic about gesneriads and acquire a large number of plants in a short period of time. Unfortunately, often one or more of these new acquisitions brings some unwelcome guests-plant pests-into the growing area. Pest infestations, like social diseases, are often the unintended consequences of an innocent, pleasurable transaction.

Pests can come from any source. We all try to keep our plants pest-free, but even if your plants only come from your best friend, local Chapter sales, or the most reputable commercial growers, they may have pests on them. It is very important to inspect any plants before you take them home, and reject them if they appear to have bugs. Any plant material except for seeds can carry pests. If you grow only from seed, then you will never introduce critters into your plant collection. But this is not a realistic solution for most growers. We all enjoy adding cuttings or established plants to our collections. And most hybrids do not grow reproducibly from seed.

"An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is an old adage, but one that is well applied in the plant room. Many a collection of indoor plants has been dispatched to the garbage bin because an infested plant was placed among healthy ones. Consequently, the answer to this problem is: isolation.

Whenever and from whomever you receive a new plant, make certain that it is placed in an area away from your healthy plants and keep it in this locality until you are certain that it is completely free of any insects or disease. Eight to ten weeks should be the minimum time to keep it in isolation. A spare windowsill is a good place. Growing conditions need not be optimal, as the plant will not be there permanently but can be moved to your growing area once it passes quarantine. If you have absolutely no separate area for isolation, then at least keep new acquisitions in a plastic bag for a period of time.

While in isolation, you may want to treat your plant with your

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insecticide or biological control of choice, to help get rid of any critters that may not be visible to you.

Once you are satisfied that your new plant is clean, then it is time for repotting. It should be unpotted and as much of the soil as possible removed from its roots. The roots should then be washed clean under a gentle flow of warm water while examining them for any abnormal swelling of the root structures. If this is present it could be a sign of root nematodes. Similarly, white fluff in the soil (not perlite, which is gritty rather than fluffy) is a sign of soil mealy bugs. If you discover such root infestations, the plant should be discarded. You may attempt to salvage the plant by taking cuttings from it and discarding the base of the plant and its roots.

If the roots do appear clean, then repot the plant in fresh soil and a clean pot. The whole operation should take place in an area away from the plant room. Once repotted, the plant may again be treated with an insecticide or biological control that you normally use. It is now ready to be placed on the plant stand. It is advisable to let the plant become established before fertilizing, although if the root structure is frail, a weak solution of root-stimulating fertilizer may be applied.

