

## Lessons Learned Transplanting in the Dry Areas of the West Coast

by Lynn Doyle



I am a Master Gardener with basic training. I think by now I have made every mistake in the book and a few that aren't even in the books. My gardening experience extends from a garden in North Vancouver on the shoulder of Grouse Mountain where we received over 100 inches of rain a year and were blasted by some very nasty winter winds straight off the Lions (zone 7a at best), to a garden on the waterfront on the leeward side of a Southern Gulf Island in a climate as close to Mediterranean as Canada gets and now to a waterfront garden on the east coast of Central Vancouver Island. My Gulf Island garden was 8b or 9a and my Vancouver Island garden 8a to 8b.

When I first starting gardening on the Gulf Islands, managing the summer drought proved challenging. The plants I brought from North Van had a very difficult time getting established.

Turns out the real dormant time for most plants in my Gulf Island garden was from early/mid July until late August when the morning dew provided enough extra moist to get things started again.

*(Above right: The Gulf Island Garden: Meidiland Roses, watered only every two weeks with about two large buckets of water each time.)*



Pruning time changed. I learned one of the fastest ways to kill a plant was to prune in the spring. The plant would just really get started with new herbaceous growth as the summer drought arrived. After a couple of years of spring pruning, the plant was so weakened it could no longer survive the summer. January seemed to be the best time to prune.

Despite carefully choosing drought tolerant plants I was plagued with transplant failures. Frequent watering of the young plants did not help; plants transplanted in the spring almost universally died. I finally figured out that in order for the plants to make it through the first summer, I had to transplant in the fall as soon as the first of the rains arrived, either late September or early October. This allowed the plants to settle in before winter and have their roots well established by the end of April, about the time the rains stopped.

I found the selection of available plant material in the fall to be very limited and started collecting the largest plastic pots I could get my hands on. Plants were purchased when the selection was best and transplanted into the large pots. These pots were placed close to the house in areas that got morning and early afternoon sun. Since most of the pots were black, baffles of white material were placed in front of the pots to keep them cooler. (Yup, I did burn one or two of my babies the first year.) When water was in really short supply, I saved the water I had just washed our dinnertime vegs in, carried it straight out to the pots and watered my 'babies'. If the youngsters started to flower and/or set fruit, these were stripped from the plants; the priority was root and herbaceous growth.



I learned that I could really manage only a limited number of babies and first year transplants safely, otherwise the water demands were just too high. If I spent time in the spring prepping the beds for the plants that were going to be placed in the fall, my success rate for transplantation greatly increased. I found fertilizing the young plants increased their likelihood of failure, especially so if the fertilizing was done in the spring.

Both the Gulf Island and the Central Vancouver Island gardens have done much better once the plants were well enough established to produce material for the compost pile. The real dilemma was how to get the soil reconditioned so the plants could in fact flourish and produce

compostable material. In the early days I collected all the bags of leaves my friends and neighbours could supply, even volunteering to rake them up if necessary. To speed breakdown I spread the leaves on the lawn, put the catcher back on the mower and mowed the lawn. The result one of my most favourite soil amenders, or as I call it, the creme de la creme of compost. **Mulching is a must.** On the Gulf Island big leaf maple leaves were the local area favourite. Come fall everyone raced to the community hall to help rake the bounty from the parking area.

To help the rhododendrons, I would peel some of the moss off the top of rocks on the property and place it over the soil out to the drip line.

Using these methods, in two years I have been able to start to revitalize a neglected garden and its depleted soil on central Vancouver Island with almost no transplant failures.

**As our climate continues to change, our winters drier, our springs and summers hotter and drier, we may all have to adapt our gardening techniques.**

**In summary, lessons learned:**

- even drought tolerant plants need special care to survive their first couple of years
- purchase plants when selection is best
- transplant into large pots
- place pots in area out of the hot afternoon sun
- keep close to house for ease of care
- black pots need to be behind white baffles
- when water in short supply, hand water with water just used to wash mealtime fruit and vegetables
- strip young plants of flowers/fruit, root and herbaceous growth the priority
- adjust pruning schedule to water availability
- dormant season seems to be changing
- transplant in the fall with the start of the fall rains