

GROWERTALKS

Acres & Acres

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Plant People Are Crazy

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I don't mean that in a negative way; it's just a simple statement of fact.

Being around plant people for the last 40 years, I've long known this to be true. But it became more obvious when I started following some online gardening groups. The psychosis manifests itself primarily in strange beliefs about how to best grow plants. For proof, there's this Facebook group called House Plant Growers, with more than 200,000 members and some of them have some strange ideas.

Take this post, for example. A woman innocently asked, "Where you do you guys get your soil mix from? Looking on Amazon and Etsy and it seems quite expensive. My nearest garden center is a 45-minute drive away."

The first response was this: "I'd drive to your garden center and buy all the ingredients to make your own: worm castings, orchid bark, perlite or pumice, activated charcoal, coco coir, regular potting soil ..."

Worm castings and activated charcoal? That's enough to turn anybody off from the hobby.

Another soil-related post came in reply to a picture of a melty aloe that was apparently watered too enthusiastically with a "Help! What's happening to my aloe plant?" plea.

The suggestion? "Mix some outside dirt with the potting soil. Too much moisture now."

Granted, they diagnosed the water issue. But unless one lives where the soil is sandy, adding field soil to a commercial potting mix is only likely to increase its moisture-holding capacity.

My favorites are the plant nutritionists, who weigh in anytime someone asks, "What should I feed my new baby?" Generally, they first bash the commercial products and chain store offerings, then say they swear by compost teas, coffee grounds or aquarium water (a particular favorite). I even saw a self-described vegan who recommended "boiled kitchen scraps."

Some of the crazy plant people don't seem content with just purveying their own beliefs, either; they have to bash other ideas, no matter how competent the source. Just ask Hans Hansen, long-time breeder for Walters Gardens. Hosta is one of his specialties and he recently did a hosta webinar for Ball Publishing. Near the beginning, he showed a picture of a hosta bed he'd planted at his mom's house 30 years prior. Mom, now in her 80s and not able

to wield a rake like she used to, asked him if she had to do a spring cleanup of the now-overgrown bed.

“It’s up to you,” he answered. “You don’t have to do it. In the wild, nobody comes along and cleans them up.” Sound advice, right? Maybe not. Sometime later, Hans says, mom relayed that tidbit to a friend from the garden club—who laughed at the idea of leaving your hosta bed as nature intended.

Luckily, like Hans, and like you, I’m not a crazy plant person. I’m quite sane in my views—which, in a nutshell, are: “There are no rules—it’s your plant, so do anything you want to it.” I’ve written that quite a few times to newbie members of the house plant group who have beginner questions, especially about soils and fertilizers, since those are the topics that seem like voodoo to the uninitiated. I make a point of playing up the benefits of commercial products like Miracle-Gro that are designed by professionals, and I remind folks that gardening can and should be stress-free, fun and done any way you want. (Of course, to be fair, that includes mixing secret soils or keeping fish in order to have aquarium water, despite my views on both.)

I also mention you, my professional grower friends, and how you use the same commercial potting mix for a wide range of crops, and generally use just two or three fertilizers for everything. And in case any gardener is wondering about using pot shards, I tell them that I’ve never once seen a professional grower cover the drain holes in a pot with the remains of a busted clay pot, so don’t bother. You don’t gently rake apart root balls before transplanting, either. Who’s got time?

Lastly, I always reassure new, confused gardeners that, despite our best efforts, we all kill plants. So when they do, they should use it as an excuse to buy three more to replace it.

If your sales go up this spring, you can thank me. **GT**