

This is an article for a magazine written by Andrew Haynes, the head gardener at Edmondsham House, which was visited by a group from PHG in June 2016.

DO YOU PUDDLE?

Given that water is such a basic requirement for plant growth is quite surprising that most “how to” books devote so little space to the subject. Given the level of general ignorance it’s a wonder that so many plants survive watering regimes of pathetic little sprinklings on the one hand, to soil scouring deluges on the other. I hope I’m not trying to teach grannies how their eggs should be sucked here, but sometimes it doesn’t hurt to re-examine the basics and a method that is perhaps more relevant for a changing climate.

The ancient art of puddling in seems to be a disappearing one that is no longer taught in the local horticultural colleges; I always tell my trainees that it is one of the most important techniques that they will ever learn. This is the method to use when transplanting from pots of any size or any plant with a root ball.

First dig a hole to the exact depth of the plant and at least twice the width of the root ball. The excavated soil is transferred to a barrow (or bucket) where it is thoroughly broken up and mixed with a little garden compost.

The hole is then flooded with a large volume of water from a bucket or from the top of a watering can, forget the spout, it is too slow.

The previously watered plant is then plunged into the flooded hole, which is swiftly backfilled (with the prepared soil) before the water drains away. As the water drains it sucks the soil down around the plant, there is no need to firm so don’t! The aim is to have a layer of saturated soil in intimate contact with the root ball and a layer of dry soil on top, to slow evaporation.

In many cases this will be the only watering the plant needs, **certainly most plants won’t need watering again for a couple of weeks**, and root development will be improved if you can avoid watering for this time; instead try shading plants during the hottest part of the day.

I have on occasion lifted plants treated in this way for comparison with plants watered from above and found the puddled plants to have far more fresh root growth. Christopher Lloyd was a great advocate of “puddling” and it enabled the transplanting of asters in full flower from nursery bed to border, yes you really can get away with it!