

Grass Trees

Grass Trees are very much a part of the Australian landscape. Here are some notes on how to keep them happy in your garden.

Growth Rate – Grass Trees are extremely slow growing, and most of the plants you find in nurseries have been alive long before white settlement. They grow up to 1cm of trunk per year, and when young will take up to 10 years to start forming a trunk. So don't bother waiting around for them to grow before your eyes!

The oldies don't like change – once transplanted, Grass Trees can spend the first 2-3 years deciding whether they like the spot they have been planted in. Signs of unhappiness from transplanting can include the browning and yellowing of new leaves, and general lack of vigour. Make sure you keep an eye on the drainage, and water with diluted Seasol every now and then.

Funny roots! – Grass Trees have an unusual root system. There is a distinct lack of strong network roots binding the soil around the plant. Active roots are black and fleshy, and can be damaged easily. To minimise root disturbance when planting in the ground, keep it in the pot. Cut the base from the pot, keeping the walls of the pot intact. Bury the plant no deeper than the existing soil level, then cut the rim off the top of the pot. To help reduce transplant shock, water with diluted Seasol after planting.

Planting position – They need a very well drained, well aerated soil to grow in. If you decide to plant your Grass Tree in the ground, build the area up with sandy soil mixed with lots of gravel (but not bluestone), coarse sand, pebbles, rocks, broken bricks – basically anything that will provide bulk without nutrient. The bed will need to be built up at least 1m high, with very good drainage underneath. Avoid planting your Grass Tree in or on top of heavy clay or boggy soil, or in areas where water can sit for some time. Full sun is preferred, but they will grow in part shade quite easily.

If you are not completely confident with your drainage – keep your Grass Tree in the pot that it is purchased in. To make it more aesthetically pleasing, choose a decorative pot that is larger than the existing one, and sink the Grass Tree pot into the decorative pot. Make sure you have large rocks in the base of the decorative pot to keep the drainage from pot to pot very sharp. Raise the decorative pot above ground level for extra good drainage. If you like, you can trim the rim of the black pot away, and fill the gap between the two pots with gravel, pebbles, or anything that will drain very well.



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Watering

In the ground – when your soil drains very well, you can water your Grass Tree about once a week in summer, and once every 10 days or so in spring and autumn, if it doesn't rain. At spring/summer planting, water about twice a week for the first month, then gradually reduce watering. Each time you water, use 3-4 x 9 litre buckets worth for a good, thorough soak.

In a pot – if you have set up the pot properly (see above), it is difficult to over water your Grass Tree. Water the pot once a day in warmer months, and once every 3-4 days in the cooler months.

If your Grass Tree looks unhappy – this is commonly a drainage problem, or shock from transplanting, or sometimes a nutrient toxicity (from excess application of strong fertilisers). Keep the drainage perfect, water with Seasol or fish emulsion once a fortnight for 2 months in the growing season, or until it looks happier.

We cannot stress to you enough the importance of perfect drainage!

If you find that your soil doesn't drain as well as you had expected, you can try a liquid ground breaker to change soil structure. This will be an ongoing treatment, as liquid ground breakers will leach from the soil quickly. Water with Seasol to increase health and vigour.

Nutrient toxicity – some growers recommend quite strong fertilisers for Grass Trees, but as these fertilisers are not present naturally in Australian soils, we like to use any of the following - Seasol, small amounts of cow manure, fish emulsion, or sulphate of potash. Unfortunately, symptoms of toxicity, shock and poor drainage can all look very similar. Ask your local garden Centre for further advice.

Fungus problems – Grass Trees are highly susceptible to root attack by the Cinnamon Fungus (*Phytophthora cinnamomi*). This attack can cause a gradual decline in health, eventually killing the plant some years later. The fungus is spread by water, which splashes to different parts of the garden, or by soil adhering to garden tools or shoes. The fungus thrives where there is lots of moisture. There is no fungicide to combat this problem, so try to keep the garden free of extra moisture.

Setting fire to the crown – Flowering in the wild occurs after a bushfire. In the absence of fires, they will flower only when the season is good, or if they are very happy plants. Setting fire to the crown is an extreme measure to encourage flowering, and it is recommended only every 6-8 years, if at all. The easiest method is to place a cardboard box stuffed with newspaper over the crown, and set fire to it. The foliage will burn completely, and new foliage will develop after 6 months. We do not recommend this technique if your Grass Tree is diseased or stressed, as this may cause further stress.

Please call our lovely, knowledgeable staff on 02 – 6207 2444 if you have any questions.



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