Small things strike such terror in the hearts of the strong. We might want to express confidence in our ability to hold a baby, for instance, and feed it, because handling a helpless thing brings the uninitiated a timid sort of joy. Yes, holding new life in your hands is exhilarating, and kind. And eventually you get used to it, this skating along the thin edge of life.

As plant growers, we’re programmed to support life, and we’re basically pretty comfortable with death. At least we try not to feel guilty for the fatalities we precipitated. But bringing life into the world, the simple act of sowing seeds, with all its risks and certainties of failure, can be defeating. The loss of young life is somehow so much harder to bear.

Still, seeds are cheap, and the potential rewards so great, that many of us set down the path to failure time and again, only to find one day that success has finally come. Enough hocus pocus, enough futzing and spritzing, just the right amount of neglect, perhaps, has yielded a crop of precious plants—too many in fact! Eighty some-odd young lithops have pushed their first leaves and will surely live now, if only we can get them through the last crucial stage—the first transplant.

It’s hard to imagine having come this far and still be at risk of failure, but surely these delicate little things can’t be moved—ripped apart and re-established—without trouble. But in reality, the first transplant is so liberating and beneficial for young seedlings that the only risk you face in the first transplant is not doing it.

The first transplantation begins by separating the seedlings from one another. This is probably the most harrowing part of the process, as their roots will be somewhat intertwined, and it will feel like the roots are tearing. In fact, they are tearing. But trust us, this is actually stimulating to the plants. It lets them know that serious changes are taking place, it focusses their energies, and you can rest assured that it isn’t at all painful.

There are at least two approaches you can take to the excavation. Ideally, Catherine would like to prick out swaths of seedlings as they become large enough to handle, leaving behind the smallest plants and whatever seeds that may still be left to germinate*. Russell, in contrast, is usually

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* Catherine has noted that freshly-sown lithops seeds often come up in flushes, with perhaps 70% appearing in the first wave, within ten days of sowing, and more sprouting at semi-regular ten-week intervals. We wonder if multiple successions of seed raised Russell’s way selects for a more complete, non-delayed germination, or if stored seed simply lose this propensity.