

Propagating Plants

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Plant pieces removed from parent plants and rooted to form new plants are called "cuttings". They are a simple and inexpensive way to propagate house plants as well as garden plants. New plants that are developed from parent plants will have the same characteristics. This is very important when raising hybrids, or plants that cannot be reproduced true to form from seed. When selecting a parent to obtain cuttings from, only choose those plants that are the healthiest and sturdiest. An unhealthy, malformed specimen is unlikely to produce a quality new plant. Most all stem cuttings are prepared in the same manner before they are planted to form new roots on their own. They should be removed from the parent plant by using a sharp razor or knife. Do not use your fingernail. It is important for the blade to be sharp. Using your fingernail or dull knife will bruise the plant and cause the new cutting to not root.

There are basically three types of stem cutting: softwood, semi-ripe and hardwood. Which type you use depends on the plant you are propagating, material available to you and the time of year. Generally, cuttings from young plants will root quicker and easier than those taken from older plants. Following will be a discussion on techniques used in softwood cutting propagation.

Softwood cuttings are usually taken in the late spring and summer from new shoots before they start to become ripe or woody. These cuttings are soft and fleshy and will lose moisture easily, so they need to be kept damp. The best material to use for softwood cuttings comes from the soft, new side shoots. If the plant is outside, obtain your cuttings early in the morning while the leaves are still full of water. They need to be sturdy and not limp from a lack of moisture. Immediately after taking the cutting, place it in a clean plastic bag and seal it. This will reduce the moisture the cutting will lose. Trim your cutting for planting as soon as possible. Allowing it to dry will damage the tissue and increase the chance for failure. To prepare your cutting, take your sharp knife or razor and cut your selected shoot below a node or leaf joint. The tip of the shoot should be left intact. The majority of cuttings should be around 3 inches long with the foliage stripped on the lower half. The cutting should also have two to four leaves on top. Before planting in your soil mix, treat the lower portion of the cutting with a rooting hormone. This will speed the rooting process. Apply these hormones according to label directions.

An open, well drained compost mixture of equal parts moist sphagnum and coarse sand is well suited for rooting softwood cuttings. This can be mixed at home or purchased already mixed. Fill your rooting containers to within one inch of the rim. Make sure your mix is thoroughly moist before inserting your cuttings but not overly wet as rot will occur. Placing a glass or plastic cover over your cuttings will provide a good environment for rooting. Bottom heating will also speed the process. When the tips of the cuttings start to grow rapidly, it is a fairly good indication that the cutting has rooted. Look at the bottom of the container for white roots. Do not pull the cutting out of the container as this may damage any rooting that has started. Once a good root system has developed, the cuttings can be moved to their individual pots to establish. If the new plants are to be moved outdoors, you will want to acclimate them slowly to outdoor temperatures. This may take several weeks to accomplish.