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Between
The Rows

On propagating your houseplants

Recorder Columnist Gardeners are known for their generosity, for their willingness to share experience, advice — and plants.

Fortunately, it's not too hard to share plants. Many of them are eager to reproduce themselves and it's easy to get others to reproduce using one technique or another.

This time of the year we are all thinking of gifts. The gift of a new young plant will give a relative, friend or neighbor pleasure for many months or even years. And it will even give them the opportunity to pass the gift on when their plant matures and needs dividing or pruning.

Some plants like Boston ferns and Swedish ivy will send up new shoots around the original plant. When these shoots are young the plant can be unpotted and divided.

There are several common ways to propagate houseplants.

A friend of mine has an extensive collection of houseplants and he always keeps a flower box or two filled with damp sand or perlite ready to accept a cutting snipped off a plant while he is pruning and grooming his collection. Then, in just a few weeks, he can pot up that newly rooted plant at his leisure and present it as a gift.

There are two types of cutting — a stem cutting and a leaf cutting. Stem cuttings should be from three to six inches of firm growth that includes at least two or three leaf nodes, those little bumps where leaves originate.

Remove all but two or three of the leaves and all buds and flowers. You want the plant to put all its strength into developing roots. You'll get pretty flowers when the plant is more mature and strong.

Make a little hole in your damp rooting medium, sand or perlite (a sharp pencil is a good tool) so that you won't damage the stem as you insert it, smooth the medium around the stem and mist it. Put it out of direct sunlight. Use a plastic bag to create a miniature greenhouse to help give you dependable success. Just make sure the plastic doesn't touch the plant or you'll get rot; hold it away with little sticks.

Within a few weeks you can test your plant. Tug it to see if it comes loose. If it resists your gentle tug, it's ready to be potted up in real soil. If it does come loose, just replace it, water it again and wait for a little longer.

You can take stem cuttings of geraniums, coleus, Wandering Jew, Swedish ivy and many, many others.

Leaf cuttings are taken in a similar fashion, except that you will take a single leaf and one inch of stem.

Insert it into your damp rooting medium at a 45 degree angle.

You probably won't need to make a plastic bag greenhouse because leaf cuttings are more tender, but make sure you keep the rooting medium damp. When little plants appear around the mother leaf, separate them and pot them individually, discarding the mother leaf. This method works very well with fleshy-leaved plants like African violets, gloxinias and streptocarpus, the Cape primrose.

Succulent plants like the jade tree, Christmas cactus or burro's tail sedum don't have leaf stems, but the leaf can be tucked directly part way into a pot of damp rooting medium and it will root very easily.

Notice that cuttings should not be placed where they will get direct sun while they are rooting.

Many people have seen others put cuttings in a glass of water to root. In many cases this will work to some degree, but it's important to remember that water roots are quite different from roots that develop in a soil mix. If you root a cutting in water, move it into a pot when the roots are no more than an inch long. Then allow time for the plant to adjust and start to develop regular roots.

Less common, but no more difficult, is the process called air-layering. This works well for plants with heavy single stems like rubber trees and dracenas, especially when they have grown too tall, with all the leaves at the top.

Make a cut about one third of the way through the stem near the top of the plant, allowing just an attractive length of stem. Prop the cut open with a toothpick, then pack the whole stem with damp sphagnum moss (not peat moss!) and tie the long fibered moss in place around the cut. Take a piece of clear heavy plastic and tie that around the sphagnum moss to keep it damp. Care for the plant as you would ordinarily.

It will take several months, but the plant will eventually send out roots from the cut you made. When you see those roots have grown through the moss and look as though they are potbound inside the plastic, cut the stem just below the new roots and pot up your smaller, but vigorous and more attractive plant.

No matter what type of plant you grow you can successfully increase your stock for yourself or for gifts.

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