

Home/Garden

Notes from the rac

Cooperative trees force new look at tr

The Christian Science Monitor

If only earthworms could talk. Their slender, flexible bodies free of projecting arms or legs enable them to explore the labyrinth of tree roots spread out beneath our feet. Worming their way between even a rock and a hard place they can follow the subterranean circuits through which water and nutrients flow. We, on the other hand, get only sporadic glimpses of the underpinnings of trees. A hurricane throws an ancient maple, tipping up its roots for our inspection; flood water scours out a riverbank, undermining the roots of the hemlock growing at its edge; a mail-ordered sapling cherry arrives on the doorstep bare-rooted.

Deliberate excavations of mature trees involve moving as much as 300 tons of soil at a time. But from these heroic undertakings comes the knowledge that most tree roots occupy only the top three feet of soil, and that except where the ground is bare, the smaller absorbing roots of trees occur in the top six inches. To be sure, the size and shape of the root system depend on species and on soil conditions. The drier and poorer a soil, the more far-ranging the root system in relation to the tree's top, although few trees ever develop a root system as big as the crown. The shovel has also corrected

the artist's notion that roots radiate evenly from the trunk's base. Roots go wherever the going is good, no matter how lopsided the result.

Roots go where the going is good

It is this latter characteristic that is most likely to confront us. Tree roots regularly invade and occupy our drains, and they erect barricades as they come to the surface between sections of concrete sidewalk. Roots expropriate the water and fertilizer we put out for the grass on our lawns, and they supply the resurgence of sprouts on the stumps of trees cut down years ago. So many of our dealings with tree roots are contentious ones that in our struggle for dominion, it is easy to be reminded of the photographs of Angkor Wat, or Tikal, pictures of triumphant tree roots with a stranglehold on the remains of civilization.

If we warm-blooded mobile creatures find ourselves competing with trees, what must they do with each other? Trees have so many identical tastes that closely spaced pairs seem as destined to clash as two dogs faced with a single bone. Gardeners have learned from experience that crowded lettuce plants don't develop properly. It seems only natural that the principle should extend to trees.

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Begonias: Rewards for indoor gardeners

Begonias are a large and varied family of flowering plants that are very rewarding for the indoor gardener. All of them produce flowers in shades of pink, white, red or orange. Some are held above the leaves in delicate sprays and some droop in pendulous clusters making them perfect for hanging baskets.

The rex begonia is prized for its magnificent foliage. These leaves are often quite large, a foot or so in length and nearly as wide across, but there are miniatures as well that can be tucked into a tea cup or terrarium. Rex begonia leaves are not only large, they come in a variety of forms, heart-shaped, long and tapering, deeply cleft and wing-shaped, sometimes spiralled and some with ruffled edges. And finally, they come in a whole rainbow of color, all shades of green, red and pink, even purple and silver.

The "painted leaves" of rex begonias are lushly described in the catalogs. Fireworks has large leaves with "wine red veins blending into silver and an edging of raspberry purple." Painted Lady is "daubed like an artist's pallet with splashes of red and green."

For all their flamboyance, rex begonias are not difficult to grow. They need bright light, but no direct sun. An east or west window is very good. Temperatures can range in the 60s, but they will not thrive if your house is hot and dry. If they are kept in a room that is too warm, the leaves will curl and may become blotchy. Weakened by too much heat they are more susceptible to attack by aphids, mealybugs or cyclamen mites.

Humidity is important to begonias. If your house is very dry in the winter, they will benefit from a humidifier — and so will you and your furniture. Without a humidifier, you can fall back on the old technique of setting the flower pots on a tray filled with pebbles and water. You don't want the pots sitting directly in the water, but as it evaporates the air around the plants will be more humid.

Rex begonias do best when they are at least slightly potbound. It's a good idea to use plastic pots so that the soil will remain moist and not dry out rapidly. On the other hand you do have to use some caution — don't overwater. Fertilize once a month with a dilute solution of houseplant fertilizer during the growing season which extends from March through October.

During their winter dormant season, rex begonias will not put out any new foliage and they may drop a few leaves, but don't get discouraged. They will put out new growth in the

Pat Leuchtman Between The Rows



spring. Don't despair of growing begonias if your house does not provide the most ideal conditions. Plants often surprise us by adapting well to a less than perfect situation. We all know people who have had great success when conventional wisdom would have decreed failure.

Any begonia can be propagated by taking a stem cutting, but it's fascinating to watch a rex begonia leaf produce tiny new plantlets from leaf-vein cuttings. Depending on the size of your leaf, you may need a fairly wide flower pot, crocked so it will drain well and filled with a loose rooting medium. Take the rex begonia leaf and turn it over so you can see the veins clearly. Only choose veins that run from the center of the leaf all the way to the edge and cut across them with a razor blade. Press the leaf with its several cut veins into the damp rooting medium and in a few weeks a plantlet will grow from each cut.

It's important to keep the leaf in contact with the damp rooting medium. You can do this by pinning the leaf down with hairpins or paper clips. I've known people who sprinkle a few pebbles on top of the leaf. Put the whole flower pot in a clear plastic bag and close it to keep in the humidity. Keep the pot out of the sun while it is rooting. When the plantlets are two inches tall they can be separated and potted up in their own pots.

There is another propagation method that is similar, but you cut the leaf into wedges, each wedge including a vein that goes from the center to the edge. Take this wedge and put it in a small pot of damp sand pointed end down and put this pot into a plastic bag. Whenever you have a plant or cutting in a plastic bag, make sure you have arranged supports so that the bag does not touch the plant or it will rot. Again, keep the pot out of the sun and in 8-10 weeks you should have a new plantlet that can be repotted into a larger pot with regular potting soil.

Sources: Kartuz Greenhouses, 1408 Sunset Drive, Vista, CA 92083; Lauray of Salisbury, Undermountain Rd., Salisbury, CT 06068 catalog \$2; Logee's Greenhouses, 55 North Street, Danielson, CT 06239 catalog \$3.



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