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Propagating Plants by Cuttings

A lot of you call me from time to time and ask me about propagating all kinds of woody ornamentals including crape myrtles, camellias, butterfly bush and a variety of other plants. Many of these plants are favorites in your own home garden or landscape or else favorite selections from friends' and neighbors' yards.

One of the best ways to propagate woody ornamental plants is to use cuttings. Cuttings offer many advantages as a propagation method. The most obvious is that the new plants will be true to variety, that is to say they will be the same as the plant from which the cutting was taken. This is usually not true of seed propagated plants. Another advantage is that basically the sky is the limit as to what you can propagate, you simply have to find what you like and give it a try. Finally, it is a lot of fun and you can get a great sense of accomplishment when the cuttings you took develop into beautiful landscape plants.

There are a couple of drawbacks to taking cuttings. First is that it is not always 100 percent dependable. Many times success comes from a lot of trial and error. If you don't have good luck the first time Don't give up. Another drawback is that it takes a lot of time for the small cutting to sprout roots and develop into a plant large enough to place into our gardens and landscapes. We often get spoiled when we go down to the local nursery and purchase plants large enough to go directly into the landscape.

Mid to late July is a great time propagate many woody ornamentals from cuttings. July is a great time because the new spring growth has had a chance to harden off. A greenhouse, cold frame, or a deep-rooted box will increase the success of growing your cuttings into prized landscape plants. Your cuttings should be taken from the last three to six inches of the hardened new growth at the very end of the limbs. The bottom leaves should be removed from the cutting leaving only two or three leaves and the vegetative buds on the tip of the cutting. If flower buds are present on your cutting, they should be removed since you want all the energy stored in the cutting to be used for root development not flower development.

Cut the bottom end of your cutting with a very sharp knife or razor; at an acute angle (one that is less than 90 degrees). Dip the freshly cut stem in a rooting hormone such as Rootone (or one of several others available at most lawn and garden centers) to stimulate the development of roots. Make a hole with a nail or small pencil in your moistened rooting media and insert the cutting one half its length into the media. Gently firm or pack down the media with your hand and water your cuttings thoroughly.

One of my favorite rooting medias is to use perlite or peat moss mixed with an equal part of sand. When rooting only a few cuttings, a one-gallon plastic container of the media is adequate space. After sticking up to six cuttings, place a two or three-liter clear soft drink bottle with the bottom cut out over the cuttings. Place the container and soft drink bottle with your cuttings in a shady area and check them periodically to make sure they do not dry out. Placing your cuttings in a shady area will prevent them from drying as quickly, and remember that your new cuttings do not have roots (yet) and little if any foliage so they are not making food for themselves thus they will not need bright sunlight. It is only after the cuttings have developed roots and begin to grow that they will need sunlight.

When rooting a large number of cuttings, use a large deep box or bin with openings for drainage in the bottom. Place a thin layer of gravel in the bottom and cover them with one or two inches of good topsoil. Add a six-inch layer of your rooting media. Cover the entire bin with a clear layer of plastic. The box must be deep enough to allow for up to eight inches of growth on your cuttings. Make sure your box or bin is located in a shady area not in the open sunshine. Whether rooting large numbers of camellias or other woody ornamentals or only a few, you must check them regularly to maintain high moisture and humidity.

After two or three months (around early October or so) your cuttings should have developed a root system of their own. Your rooted cuttings can be potted to large peat pots or directly into one-gallon containers with a very high organic matter soil. Do not plant them too deeply or you will be very disappointed with your results and you will need to take more cuttings next year. Remember it is the size and health of the root system on your rooted cutting that will determine whether it lives or dies, not the size of the container or the amount of top growth. The soil medium in the containers should have a pH of between 5.5 and 6.5 for your rootings to grow at their best. The media also needs to be well drained, hold nutrients, and hold moisture. After transplanting your rooted cuttings into one gallon or similar containers, you should topdress them with a small amount of a complete slow release fertilizer or even a very light application of a water soluble 20-

20-20. Just don't get carried away as too much fertilizer can burn the tender new roots. For this reason, I prefer the slow release fertilizers.

Immediately after planting your new woody ornamentals in their permanent location or even for your established plants that are already a part of your landscape, mulch them with two to four inches of pine straw, pine bark, or shredded leaf material. Peat moss and sawdust (unless it is old and well rotted) do not usually make good mulch material because they tend to form a hard dry crust when dry.

Woody ornamentals are not generally fertilized the first year after rooting. After their first year, apply fertilizer in the spring after blooming but before the new growth starts. There are a variety of fertilizers available for your ornamentals. Just remember next spring that with the fast release inorganic fertilizers, you will need to apply very lightly and more frequently than with slow release fertilizers. Do not apply any high nitrogen fertilizer after July, so that the plants will have a longer period to harden off and avoid freeze damage this winter.