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News Release

Propagating Camellias

Question: My neighbor has a beautiful old camellia that blooms every February. I would like to have one just like it in my yard. She does not know the name of the variety. What is the simplest way to get a new plant that will be identical to my friend's?

Answer: You have two options to get a new plant identical to your neighbor's. One is to try and identify the variety and see if it is available to purchase commercially. See the information about the upcoming camellia show at the end of this article for help identifying the plant. Also, you could propagate a new plant yourself.

One of the easiest ways to propagate your own new camellia plant is to use a technique called air layering. Air layering can be used on many types of plants and at various times of the year, but for camellias I would do this after danger of severe cold but before it gets too warm. Late March or April is usually a good time to start the process.

Obtain a small bag of sphagnum moss from a garden center and soak overnight a double handful for each rooted plant you want. You need the moss to be thoroughly soaked before the next step in the process.

Select a nice section of healthy looking wood on the mother plant, about one to one and a half feet long. Take a sharp knife and cut a ring around the stem in two places about one inch apart. Cut deep enough to remove the bark and cambium layer just under the bark in the one inch area. Sprinkle some plant rooting hormone on the wound and place the sphagnum moss around the wound after squeezing any excess moisture from the moss. Take some plastic (an old bread bag works well) and totally cover the sphagnum moss. Tape both ends of the plastic cover to trap the moisture inside the bag. Electrical tape works well but any weather resistant tape is fine. It helps to keep light out so cover the whole thing with aluminum foil, giving the appearance of a large baked potato.

It will take four to six months for the root system to develop enough to be removed from the mother plant. You can test by feeling the bag after a few months to see how full it has gotten. As the roots form, the bag should become tight with the newly developed root system. Once the bag is filled with roots you may cut the baby plant free from the mother plant just below the bag.

Remove the foil and bag to transplant into a container. Use a good light potting mix with mostly pine bark and a little peat moss to grow the new plant. Before planting in the landscape I would suggest you grow it in a container for a year after rooting. You may use a slow release fertilizer the first spring after transplanting in the container. Make sure to keep the plant watered properly in the container and in the soil after transplanting to the permanent site.

By the way, if you would like to see some beautiful camellias and talk to some expert camellia gardeners, mark your calendar for the 12th and 13th of February. There will be a camellia show held at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. On Saturday the doors will be open for public viewing from 2:00 to 5:00 PM and again from 1:00 to 4:00 PM on Sunday. If you would like to enter your locally grown outdoor camellia blooms you may bring them from 9:00 to 11:00 AM on Saturday. There is no charge for entry or to attend the show. As an added bonus you may bring flowers you do not know the names of and have experienced camellia growers make an attempt at identifying what variety you have. Bring those unidentified blooms between 9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Saturday morning and leave them with your name and contact information.

For more details about the camellia show contact Tena Holcombe at tenah@bellsouth.net. For more information about growing camellias visit the following Extension web site: www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-0202/ or contact Regional Extension Agent Tony Glover at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@aces.edu.

