

How to take cuttings

It's cheap, it's easy and it needs no special equipment



Why take cuttings?

A cutting is simply a section of plant that, when put into suitable soil or compost, will produce roots and grow into a new plant. By taking cuttings you can

- Improve children's understanding of how plants grow
- Propagate a wide variety of plants
- Produce lots of plants for little cost

Many plants are easy to grow from cuttings and this is a good way to produce more plants for your garden, or to raise plants for sale. For example you could produce enough dwarf box plants to create a low-cost hedge, allow every child to grow a rosemary or mint plant to take home, grow lots of willow plants for weaving, or provide the basis for an enterprise scheme to grow and sell herbs, or houseplants.

When to take cuttings

You can take cuttings almost all year round but the type of cutting, and the most suitable plants to take them from, will vary. A good plant encyclopaedia should tell you which type of cutting is suited to which plant and when to take it. There are also some general guidelines with the step-by-step instructions. As you can see, many cuttings can be taken over quite a long period, but if you wanted to take a different type of cutting each term you could go for semi-ripe cuttings in autumn term, hardwood cuttings in spring term and softwood cuttings in summer term.



RHS Campaign for School Gardening



Taking semi-ripe cuttings

These are taken from shoots that are soft at the tips but going hard, or ripe, near the base. This happens from mid-summer to early autumn depending on the plant.

Preparation

You will need scissors, a medium-sized flower pot (10-12cm across) or several smaller ones, a dibber or pencil, multipurpose compost, a plastic bag, a rubber band, a label and a soft pencil plus shoots 10-15cm long that are soft at the tips but firm (ripe) at the base.

Step-by-step



1. Fill the pots with moist, multipurpose compost. You can mix in up to 50 percent grit or perlite to improve drainage.



2. Trim the shoot just below a leaf, remove the lowest leaves, and the tip if it is very soft.



3. Make a hole with the dibber, put the cutting in and gently firm the compost.



4. Label the pot and cover the cuttings with a plastic bag fixed with a rubber band, to keep the air moist. Put in a well-lit, sheltered position.

Suitable plants

Bay (*Laurus*), box (*Buxus*), *Choisya*, *Escallonia*, heather (*Calluna* and *Erica*), *Hebe*, ivy (*Hedera*), lavender (*Lavandula*), periwinkle (*Vinca*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus*), sage (*Salvia*) and *Viburnum*.



Taking hardwood cuttings

These are taken from shoots that are hard and woody. Cuttings are taken in autumn after the leaves have fallen, or in late winter, well before the buds start to open.

Preparation

You will need secateurs, a large flower pot (20cm or more across), a label, a soft pencil, multipurpose compost and grit plus sections about 20-30cm long taken from firm, straight, woody shoots.

Step-by-step



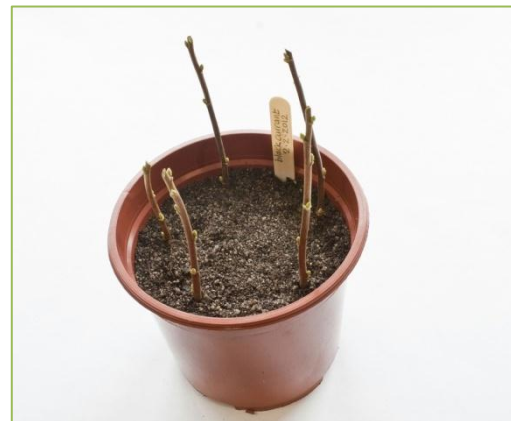
1. Fill the pot with an equal mix of moist, multipurpose compost and horticultural grit (sold in garden centres).



2. Cut straight across the base of the shoot, just below a bud. Remove the soft shoot tip, cutting at an angle to show this is the top.



3. Push the cuttings into the compost so that about two-thirds of the length is buried.



4. Label the pot then put it in a cool, sheltered place such as next to a north-facing wall, or in an unheated polytunnel or greenhouse.

Suitable plants

Blackcurrant (*Ribes*), butterfly bush (*Buddleja*), dogwood (*Cornus*), elderberry (*Sambucus*), *Forsythia*, gooseberry (*Ribes*), grape vine (*Vitis*), mock orange (*Philadelphus*), poplar (*Populus*), rose (*Rosa*), *Weigela* and willow (*Salix*).



Taking softwood cuttings

These are taken from fresh, young, new growth that is still soft, usually in spring or early summer. Avoid shoots with flowers as they root less well.

Preparation

You will need scissors, a medium-sized flower pot (10-12cm across) or several smaller ones, a dibber or pencil, multipurpose compost, a plastic bag, a label and a soft pencil, plus shoots about 10cm long taken from fresh, young growth.

Step-by-step



1. Fill the pot with moist, multipurpose compost. You can mix in up to 50 percent grit or perlite to improve drainage.



2. Trim the base of the cutting just below a leaf, and remove most of the leaves.



3. Make a hole with the dibber or pencil, put the cutting in and gently firm the compost.



4. Label the pot and enclose it in a plastic bag sealed with a rubber band, to keep the air moist. Put the pot in a well-lit position but out of direct sunlight.

Suitable plants

Begonia, busy lizzie (*Impatiens*), coleus (*Solenostemon*), *Fuchsia*, *Hydrangea*, mint (*Mentha*), *Pelargonium*, *Sedum*, thyme (*Thymus*), tomato (*Lycopersicum*), tradescantia (*Zebrina*) and *Verbena*.



Aftercare

The challenge when looking after cuttings is to keep them alive and healthy until they have developed their own roots. This means not letting them get too dry, so they wilt, or too wet, so they rot.

Hardwood cuttings take longest to root, but need little aftercare; just check weekly and water sparingly if the compost is dry. In summer, tip the cuttings out of the pot. Depending on the plant, some will have rooted and can be moved on to individual pots, or into the ground. Replant any unrooted ones back in the pot – they should root by autumn.

Softwood cuttings and **semi-ripe cuttings** need more care, but root more quickly – sometimes in a few weeks. Two or three times a week remove the plastic bag and shake off excess water. Check that the compost is moist and water sparingly if necessary. Promptly remove any leaves or shoots that die. Once roots appear at the base of the pot, usually after six to 10 weeks, cut the top off the plastic bag. This will acclimatise the cuttings to drier air. After a further week or two remove the bag, tip the cuttings out and replant them into larger pots.

More propagation tips

Collecting cuttings

Always cut just above a bud, or leaf on the parent plant. This avoids leaving a snag that will die back. If the cuttings have leaves, keep them fresh in a plastic bag until you are ready to deal with them. If necessary, they can be kept in the fridge for a few days without serious deterioration.

Labelling

Always label your cuttings with the type of plant, the variety if relevant, the name of the grower and the date.

Hormone rooting powder

Books often recommend that you dip the ends of your cuttings into hormone rooting powder to encourage them to root. However, most easy-to-root plants including those suggested in this leaflet do not require it. If you do use it tip a little out of the container and reseal it, then throw away any that is left over so the main supply remains dry. Buy new powder each year as it quickly loses its effectiveness.

Money-saving

You should always buy new compost for taking cuttings. Growing bags are often a cheap option. Otherwise you can use recycled materials for most things provided they are clean. For example use plastic wrapping from magazines and catalogues instead of new plastic bags, use a length of cane or stick as a dibber, and use food containers such as yoghurt pots instead of plant pots – just put some holes in the bottom.

