

## The Roots of Propagation

If you are looking for an excuse, any excuse, to get outside and dig, consider excavation for root cuttings. It can be a grubby process which may explain why it is not done as frequently as other means of propagation such as seeds or stem cuttings. However, I suspect most of us are reluctant to probe about the roots of a favorite shrub for fear of killing it.

A splendid way to duplicate a shrub at little cost, this procedure is best done in late fall or early spring. After the rollercoaster weather of this fickle February, I do believe we can assume that in Gloucester Mathews spring starts any day after tomorrow. In searching for roots, you do have to be careful not to chop through too many of them by sticking your spade too close to the center of the plant. Insert your spade or fork about two feet away and gently pry a large clump upward far enough so you can see what you have. I would leave the spade in place so that when I finished chopping at the roots I could ease it out and the clump would return to its original position. It would be a help to water it well after disturbing it.

In propagating a shrub, choose a root that is the diameter of a pencil. If you are working with a perennial, a thicker root is better. When cutting it, use a sharp pruner and cut the end nearest the center of the plant at a 90 degree angle and cut the farthest end on a slant. In differentiating the root that way, you will know the orientation of the plant's growth. Sometimes the outer ends are noticeably slimmer, but as you continue to cut, it may be harder to tell which end is which. Each of the root sections you have selected should be cut into 3" to 6" pieces, again marking the end closest to the plant at a 90 degree angle and the farther ends at a slant.

When you've lined up your shrub cuttings tie them into a bundle loosely matching the square ends. Since these bundles are going to be stored in the ground, leave a long tail so you can find it in a few weeks when you want to dig up the bundle. When preparing the hole put a few inches of sand in the bottom. You don't want them to rot! And be sure the slanted ends are down and the square tops are up and no more than two inches below the level of the soil.

In three or four weeks you will want to check their progress. They may or may not have discernible roots but they are ready to be planted in good garden soil, well marked so that when those dear green tufts appear they won't be absent-mindedly weeded out.

In working with perennial plants the books suggest laying the root cuttings horizontally in a flat of potting soil because they produce shoots fairly soon, especially when kept inside. Cover them with ½" of potting soil, then a pane of glass to retain humidity. Place them under lights. Once sprouted they need the TLC you give to your seedlings, water, light, a weak feeding solution.

Unfortunately, one of the plants for which this technique works especially well is one I have spent hours trying to grub out-trumpet vine, *Campsis radicans*. But it is also recommended for hydrangeas and dogwoods, sumac and mock orange, even a rose if it is on its own roots. This time of year those shrubs that send up shoots from the ground, such as forsythia, are amenable to having a stem pulled away from the parent and replanted on its own. This should work with flowering quince (*Chaenomelis*) sweetspire (*Itea virginica*) even wax myrtle (*Myrica cerifera*) or crepe myrtle

(*Lagerstroemia indica*).

## CABBAGES & KINGS

Coming to your friendly neighborhood grocery store soon will be a third answer to the paper or plastic question, a biodegradable plastic bag. They have been tried before, made with cornstarch or some such, but they tended to biodegrade between car and pantry. It is a solution worth an effort when you consider that plastic bags take hundreds of years to disintegrate and they have been seen flying around poles, both the north and the one in Antarctica.

Another problem that makes the solution difficult is the use of modified corn stock in biodegradable plastic. Corn itself is very energy intensive as well as being used and over used as both food and fuel. Most of us have a collection of canvas or cloth bags, even string bags: the challenge is remembering that we have them stowed in the car trunk before we are ready to check out. When re-use becomes fashionable, you will no longer be considered eccentric!