

Propagating Softwood and Semi-Hardwood Stem Cuttings

Taken during the active growing season, from spring until late summer, softwood cuttings are the easiest stem cuttings to take and the fastest to root. They are made from relatively soft, flexible new growth. Semi-hardwood cuttings are taken somewhat later in the growing season, usually in summer or early autumn. A suitable semi-hardwood stem is firm enough to snap if bent sharply; if it just bends, it's too mature for satisfactory rooting.

In addition to deciduous and evergreen shrubs and trees, you can also propagate many perennials by the method below.

1. Prepare containers first. Use clean pots or flats with drainage holes. Fill them with a half-and-half mixture of perlite and peat moss, or with perlite alone. Dampen the mixture
2. Gather cuttings early in the day, when plants are fresh and full of moisture. The parent plant should be healthy and growing vigorously. With a sharp knife or bypass pruners, cut an 8- to 12-inch length of stem.
3. Prepare the cuttings by removing and discarding any flower buds, flowers or side shoots. Then slice the stem into 3- to 4- inch pieces, each with at least two nodes (points at which leaves are attached). Make each cut just below a node, since new roots will form at this point. Strip the lower leaves from each cutting.
4. Dip the lower cut ends of the cuttings in root hormones; shake off the excess. (Some plants will root without the use of hormones.)
5. Using a pencil or thin dowel, make holes in the rooting medium an inch or two apart; then insert the cuttings. Firm the medium around the cuttings and water with a fine spray. Label each container with the name of the plant and date. Set containers in a warm spot that's shaded but not dark.
6. Enclose each container in a plastic bag; fasten the bag closed to maintain humidity. Open the bag each day for a few minutes every day to provide ventilation.
7. Once the cuttings have taken hold and are growing roots, they will begin to send out new leaves. To test for rooting, gently pull on the cutting; if you feel resistance, roots are forming. At this point expose the cuttings to drier air by opening the bag; if the cuttings wilt, close the bag again for a few days.
8. When the plants seem acclimated to open air, transplant each to its own pot of lightweight potting soil. By the next planting season, the new plants should be ready to go out in the garden.