Propagating plants factsheet

Propagating plants

One of the real adventures of gardening is actually 'creating' (propagating) your own plants. This is also a good option if funds are tight and you can't afford to invest in loads of new plants from the nursery.

The major forms of plant propagation that you can use are:

Growing from seed
Growing from cuttings
Dividing plants
Growing from runners.

You can try some or all of the methods. Just remember, not all the plants you grow will succeed, but this does not mean you have failed – not every seed will grow a tree!

Growing from seed

Growing plants from seeds is not only cheap and fast, but can be free if you collect seeds from your previous crop for planting out in the next season. The three major ingredients that most plants need to germinate (sprout) include:

Moisture
Warmth
Soil (or potting mix).

All seeds have slightly different needs, so it is important to read the seed packet (if you have one) and to research how and when to plant each variety. The packet will also tell you how deeply to plant the seeds and how far apart from each other they should be sown. If it says "Place seeds 30cms apart" it really means 30cms apart - not 10 or 15cms. If you plant too close to each other the plants will just shoot up as high as possible fighting for sunlight and have little energy to produce what you want them to.

In general, a seed needs to be buried to the same depth of soil as the size of the seed itself. Therefore, very small seeds will only need a sprinkle of soil to cover them. However, if a seed is one centimetre long, make sure it is covered with one centimetre of soil.

Once your have harvested your foods save a few from being eaten and use the seeds from these to plant in next years garden. You will need to dry the seeds out before you store them so they don't get mouldy.

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Saving seeds from foods you bought at the supermarket (potatoes or tomatoes) isn't a great idea. Tomatoes are generally bred so that the seeds don't reproduce (why, we don't know) and potatoes can contain blight, which won't just ruin this season's crop of spuds but might also infect the soil forever more. You're much better off buying new seeds from a nursery.

Pest Control

Seedlings are a favourite food of snails, slugs and birds. Child and animal friendly snail pellets are a good option for snails and slugs. For birds try hanging balloons with scary faces! Just remember, birds are actually good for a garden – they will also eat snails, slugs and caterpillars.

Growing plants from cuttings

Growing a plant from a cutting involves cutting a piece off an existing plant with a sharp, clean knife and placing it in potting mix to create a new plant. This method of propagation is best suited to some perennial plants (plants that grow from season to season and don't die off after flowering).

One group of plants that is particularly easy to grow from cuttings is the family Lamiaceae, which includes rosemary, lavender, sage, mint and thyme (we have basically created enough plants for a lavender farm using this method). Vietnamese mint can be very easily propagated by leaving a cutting in a glass of water until it sends out roots, then planting it in the garden or in a pot. And don't forget about succulents – they are super easy to propagate.

See here: http://needlesandleaves.net/blog/2013/5/31/propagating-leggy-succulents

When to take cuttings

Spring is the best time to take cuttings. This is when plants are sprouting abundant new growth. You should take your cuttings from the soft new growth on the tips of stems.

Towards the end of the summer and early autumn, semi-hardwood cuttings (darker green growth, from the current year) should be taken from four nodes down from the tip of the stem. A node is a place on a stem where one or more buds sprout.

In winter, hardwood cuttings can be taken (for example, from grapevines). The hardwood is the older, harder growth on a stem from the previous year. It is typically brown and woody.

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How to plant cuttings

Once you have taken your cutting, dip the cut end in honey to prevent infection, or in hormone powder or gel, to help roots to form. Remove the bottom couple of leaves (or all of the leaves from hardwood cuttings).

Poke a hole in the soil or potting mix with a dibber (this can be a pencil, a chopstick or your finger), and place the cutting in the hole and firm the soil around it. If you make the hole with the cutting itself, you could damage it.

Water your cuttings and leave them in a warm, sheltered, shaded position with plenty of light. You could cover the pot with a plastic bag or cut-off plastic bottle to create a mini-greenhouse and retain moisture. Softer cuttings will grow roots faster than hardwood cuttings.
In our experiment, your cuttings may look at little grim for a while: don't rip them out until you're certain they're dead – plants can grow from the smallest bit of life).

Dividing plants

Clumping perennial plants (such as mint, tarragon and oregano) can also be lifted and divided into smaller clumps and transplanted, to create new, revitalised plants.

Dig up your plant when it has finished flowering and gently remove the soil from the roots. Use a sharp knife to divide the plant, and remember not to let the roots dry out. Plant each division into the soil, adding compost at the same time. Water as usual!

Growing plants from runners

Many plants send out shoots that run across the ground and will take root where they touch a bare patch of soil. You can easily turn these into separate plants by cutting off the runner and planting it separately. A good example of this type of propagation is the strawberry plant.

How long should you leave your plants in their pots before you plant them out in your garden?

Most plants need to have a decent root base before being planted out. If you're taking your cuttings in early summer (after plants have finished flowering) then you should leave them in their pots until the next planting season (probably spring, depending on where you are).

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