

Propagation Primer I
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Plants' drive to reproduce can be seen and exploited in every garden. No need for sex; plants can do it asexually. Nearly every cell contains the genetic information to produce an exact copy. Provide favorable conditions to a root, stem or leaf and reap the rewards. Helping plants do what their genes are ready to do anyway is what propagation is all about. The process ranges from highly sophisticated tissue culture cloning to the simple act of noticing that your favorite shrub has taken root from a stem in contact with the soil. Here is one propagation technique, layering, to try as you finish your fall cleanup this winter.

Layering occurs when a stem in contact with soil or some other medium forms roots while still a part of the parent plant. Wow! How easy is that? Mother plant supplies water and nutrients to the baby while it grows. When enough root has formed, cut the baby loose from mom. Encourage layering by bending a stem sharply or twisting gently, nicking the bark on the soil side then cover with or submerge under soil. Stabilize the stem by pinning it down with a bobby pin shaped piece of wire. If the stem is long and flexible, pin it in several places along its length. Or try burying the tip of a stem in the soil, which stimulates root growth downward followed by new stem growth upward. A little extra attention to watering and protection from harsh conditions will help the new plant establish. Some species take longer than others to root. I once waited a year for a camellia layer to take hold. Have patience.

Candidates for layering include those whose stems naturally touch the ground. Prostrate varieties of species such as rosemary, kinnikinnick and cotoneaster work well. Plants whose limber stems can be bent to the ground such as forsythia, mock orange and honeysuckle work too. Then there are species that layer themselves with no help such as strawberry and saxifraga. Here modified stems called stolons readily sprout new plants where they touch soil. A good resource if casual propagating turns into a passion is The Royal Horticultural Society Encyclopedia of Practical Gardening, [Plant Propagation](#), by Philip McMillan Browse.

Don't miss this Saturday's Yard & Garden Lecture on "Growing Species Rhododendrons in Your Garden," 10 am at Port Townsend Community Center.