

HOME-GARDEN

More of a good thing: Tips for propagating house plants

Grace Elton Special to the Telegram & Gazette

Published 5:03 a.m. ET Feb. 19, 2023

Growing up in South Florida, I was surrounded by green year-round. I think that's why a long, leafless New England winter just won't cut it for me. To survive, I've let my houseplant obsession take over. Eight-foot-tall Abyssinian banana (*Ensete ventricosum* 'Maurelii') plants fill my living room and elaborate plant stands spilling with orchids crowd my office. Like many houseplant-obsessed people, I also can't get enough of propagating my plants.

Vegetative propagation is the process of using a portion of vegetation, rather than seeds, to create a new plant. This form of asexual propagation results in a new plant that is genetically identical to the parent. Vegetative propagation can easily multiply your houseplant collection. With it, you can be like me — the neighborhood plant lady who sends a baby plant home with each visitor, whether they asked for one or not.

There are a few different methods of vegetative propagation; some of the most common are cuttings, layering, and division.

I usually cut back my vines in the fall, and because I just can't bear to compost the material that I remove, I use it to propagate my vines by cuttings. Cuttings can be a portion of a leaf, stem, or root of a parent plant. Common vines like Swiss cheese plant (*Monstera deliciosa*) and pothos (*Epipremnum aureum*) are easily propagated by cuttings. I like to cut a portion of the vine that has about four to six leaves. I remove the lower two leaves from the vine and put it in a vase of water. Over a few months, roots will grow from the nodes where the lower leaves were removed. The plant can be transplanted into a pot of soil when the roots are about an inch long.

Begonias are great candidates for propagation by leaf cuttings. I like to make little cuts in the raised veins on the back of the leaf with a razor blade and lay the whole leaf down on a pot of moist soil. Eventually, roots will grow from the cuts and then tiny leaves start to grow, too. If you make multiple cuts, multiple plants will grow. You can divide them into their own pots in

a few months., and you can divide them into their own pots in a few months. Many vines can also be propagated using layering techniques. To do this, I lay a piece of trailing vine on fresh soil in a new pot, and stake it in place, so it stays in contact with the soil. Fairly quickly, the vine will grow roots. Once it does, the vine can be snipped from the parent plant and live independently in its new pot. This method also works well with the “babies” that a spider plant (*Chlorophytum comosum*) produces.

Plants that grow in clumps such as ferns, peace lily (*Spathiphyllum*), and snake plant (*Dracaena trifasciata*) are good candidates for division. This is where you remove the plant from its pot and tease the stems apart to form separate plants. Each division needs to have roots attached. I do this when my plants have become pot bound — they have filled the pot with roots and need more room to grow. Rather than endlessly increasing the size of their pot, I divide them to share with friends.

To keep your parent plants and your vegetatively propagated plants healthy, always use clean tools. I clean my tools (pruners, pruning saw, razor blades) with rubbing alcohol. This reduces the risk of transferring diseases from one plant to the next. For the same reason, always use new potting soil for potting up plants during propagating.

As you explore vegetative propagation, you may find that some plants are harder to propagate than others. For these, use a rooting hormone, a powder that you dip the cut end into before placing it in the soil. You don't need rooting hormone when propagating in water. When propagating in soil, remember that before your cutting grows roots, it won't take up much water, however, the soil still needs to stay moist. Especially for leaf cuttings like begonias and succulents, daily misting with a spray bottle is more effective than deeply watering with a watering can.

My final rule of thumb? You can never have too many houseplants.

Gardening Central Mass. is written by the team at New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill. Located on 171 acres in Boylston, New England Botanic Garden is one of the region's top horticultural resources. All year long, garden visitors experience the wonder of plants, learn about the natural world, and make joyful connections. There is so much growing at the garden. Discover it today at www.nebg.org. The column will be published on the third Sunday of the month.

