

## **New Plants: Free and Easy** **by Celia Kea**

According to the California Master Gardener Handbook, “Plant propagation is the process of increasing the numbers of a given species” of plant. You, as a home gardener, can increase the number of different species of plants in your garden and also increase the number of individuals of a favorite plant by using some simple methods of propagation. I’ve tried the two techniques I’m discussing here and they work! Not only can you obtain free plants, but the techniques are so-o-o-o easy.

### **Seed Collecting**

Seeds are everywhere! So many vegetables have viable seeds. With plentiful seed sources in the form of your own home-grown veggies, there’s no worry about supply. If the first batch doesn’t make it, you can try again with your new knowledge. In my opinion, tomatoes are the most fun and worthwhile to propagate. Winter squash, like acorn squash and pumpkins, have mature seeds. Some cucumbers and summer squash can be allowed to ripen enough to produce viable seeds.

Seeds from your own garden will have been open pollinated, randomly, by bees, wasps, birds, butterflies, and other insects. These seeds may not produce plants identical to the parents. But you will have increased the genetic diversity of your garden and may produce some interesting and funny results.

Fruits, by definition, contain seeds. Be aware, however, that fruit trees and vines grown from seed take years to grow and produce. Most commercially sold fruit comes from trees grown from cuttings for uniformity. Seeds from fruit harvested from the tree have been open pollinated and, therefore, the quality might not be as good as the original. If it is, you may have created your own variety.

Many fruit trees need pollinator trees in order to set fruit. For this purpose, your seed-grown trees will serve you well. I have peach and apple trees started. One is eight feet tall at two years old. I’m eager to see what I get. The good thing about using seeds from your kitchen leftovers is that you’ll never grow what you won’t eat.

To save seeds, use water to clean off all extraneous tissue. After washing, pick out the fattest, darkest seeds. Let them air dry. Storing them in paper envelopes is a good way to avoid mold. Come spring, I start some of them in Styrofoam egg cartons on a windowsill to test them for viability. The egg carton lid can be closed to protect them from cold or too much sun.

I start seeds in stages. If we have an unseasonably cold or late spring—like the last one—you’ll need to have seedlings ready to grow outside early, with some started at later times in case of “killer” weather.

Food isn’t the only thing you can start from seed. I have started silk trees (*Albizia julibrissin*), Chinese flame trees (*Brachychiton acerifolius*), Purple Robe Locust trees (*Robinia X ambigua*) and wisteria vines from seeds. Wisteria seeds are quite pretty—they look like they could be jewelry material.



### **Greenwood Cuttings**

Another technique for propagation is greenwood (or softwood) cuttings. Most plants do a significant amount of growing in late summer, a good time to take samples of new, green growth. Late summer is also when plants start to send sugars to their roots, in order to survive the upcoming winter. This will help your new cuttings create new roots.

I was researching fruit trees and discovered figs are not started from seed, but rather from greenwood cuttings. So I tried it. My neighbor's fig tree volunteered three four-inch pieces.

Choose sections of this year's growth, which will generally be greener in color. I cut off all but the top few leaves of each cutting, gave them a light dusting of rooting hormone powder on the cut end, and stuck them in soil in a yogurt carton. I have a place under a toyon bush that is the baby plant "nursery" for my backyard nursery. I tucked the new cuttings, in their yogurt tubs, under the toyon because it is warm and moist with filtered sun all day. They lost all their leaves, but quickly showed signs of regrowth. Three out of three have survived and thrived, now eighteen inches tall after a year.

I also tried propagating butterfly bush. Three cuttings last year yielded two survivors, one eighteen inches tall and one forty-eight inches tall, both blooming now! Greenwood cuttings can also be used for camellias, photinia, and lilacs.

Transplant your cuttings from the small yogurt-sized containers to one-gallon pots (or larger) the following spring or as growth demands. All of my cuttings responded to transplanting by producing rapid new growth. Enjoy the adventure of producing your own new plants.

*Celia Kea is a Tuolumne County Master Gardener with a degree in botany. She loves to experiment with growing new plants.*