

**The Press Democrat**  
**October 01, 2022**

## **ADVICE TO GROW BY » SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS**

### **6 easy steps to start new plants from garden cuttings**



A rooted cutting is ready for planting. Plant your new cutting in good soil, either in a container or in your garden, as soon as possible.

**Question:** My neighbor has an amazing garden. Whenever I've admired a plant, she offers me a cutting, but I don't know what to do with it. Can you tell me how to start my own plants from cuttings?

**Answer:** Certainly! Starting your own plants from cuttings reduces the environmental cost of transporting plants from nurseries, fosters the preservation of heirloom varieties with plants identical to their parents and saves you money. There are several propagation methods, but the easiest is softwood propagation: taking a cutting of soft, succulent new growth, typically in spring or summer, from herbaceous or evergreen plants.

Softwood propagation is easy if you follow a few basic steps.

1. Prepare your starting mix. Combine equal parts clean sand, damp coconut coir and vermiculite. This provides drainage, water retention and aeration for your cuttings.
2. Fill clean containers that have drain holes with the mix and moisten it.
3. Collect cuttings in the early morning, when the plants are well-hydrated. Remember to clean cutting tools first with a solution of one part liquid bleach to nine parts water. This prevents your tools from spreading disease from previous uses.

Select vigorous shoots with a terminal bud at the top end of the stem from which shoots will emerge. Make your cut at an angle  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch below a node — where leaves grow from the stem — and leave at least two nodes on your cutting.

Take several cuttings to ensure a greater chance of success. Place them in water right away and label them if you're collecting from several plant species.

4. Prepare each cutting by removing all but the two to three uppermost leaves and any flowers. That way, most of the plant's energy goes toward making roots, not leaves and flowers.

If you want, you can increase your chances for success by dipping the stem ends in rooting hormone, but this isn't necessary. Shake a small amount of the powder onto a clean paper towel, roll the cut end of the moist stem in the powder and tap off any excess. Avoid putting the stem directly into the bottle. This can cause the spread of diseases.

5. Plant your cutting by making a hole in the premoistened planting mix with your finger or a pencil. Insert the stem with two nodes beneath the surface and firm the soil around the cutting.

Give your new plant some water and cover it with a clear plastic bag secured at the base with rubber bands. This creates added moisture and humidity to stimulate growth. Make sure the leaves don't touch the plastic by inserting sticks around the plant.

Another option is to invert a clear plastic cup over the plant and secure it to the rim of the container with tape.

If you're propagating several cuttings at once, consider using propagation trays. They come with tall plastic domes and are available at most home improvement stores.

6. Place your plant in a warm, protected place away from direct sunlight.

Now comes the hard part: wait at least three weeks. Check the planting medium periodically and keep it moist.

Resist pulling at the plant to see if it's rooted; you will disturb the fragile roots, and your plant may not recover.

After three weeks, give the plant a gentle tug. If it starts to come up, firm the soil around the plant and wait another week or so. Some plants just take a little longer to root.

Once your plant roots, remove the plastic. Begin feeding it with commercial plant food diluted with twice as much water as the package recommends. Plant your new cutting in good soil, either in a pot or in your garden, as soon as possible.

Plants that are most easily started from softwood cuttings include azaleas (*Rhododendron* spp.), *Begonia* spp., *Chrysanthemum* spp., *Fuchsia* spp., *Geranium* spp., *Pelargonium* spp. and any of the sages (*Salvia* spp.).

For more information on starting plants from cuttings, visit the Marin County Master Gardeners' website at <https://bit.ly/3dwnlIZ>.

### **October in the garden**

■ It's time to plant garlic! Most local nurseries carry a variety of garlic bulbs grown specifically for home gardens. To plant garlic, separate each clove from the bulb and plant pointy side up, 4 to 6 inches apart and 2 to 3 inches deep. While you're at the nursery, pick up some late-winter and early- spring-blooming bulbs like daffodils and tulips.

■ It's not too late to plant a few more cool-season veggies, such as bok choy, peas, radishes and spinach. You also can plant assorted greens like arugula, pak choi, cress, komatsuna, mizuna, mustard greens, tatsoi and mache. Also known as "corn salad," mache is a mild-tasting leafy green that will overwinter in your garden. You can cook it like spinach and use it in soups.

■ Did you lose some plants to the drought?

Consider replacing them with California native plants. This is a good time to plant native shrubs, trees and flowers. They are well-adapted to our climate and soil, use less water and promote wildlife biodiversity in your garden. Visit [bit.ly/3SFdhxA](https://bit.ly/3SFdhxA) for more information.

■ If you have deciduous trees, consider composting the leaves. You can run a lawn mower over them to break them down and encourage decomposition.

■ Use the municipal green waste bin to dispose of diseased plants or seed-bearing weeds. High temperatures are needed to kill weed seeds and pathogens; commercial compost piles get up to 190 degrees. In Sonoma County, don't put poison oak, yucca tree trimmings, bamboo, cactus and palm fronds in the green bin. Instead, throw them in the landfill trash can.

*Contributors to this week's column were Patricia Rosales, Patricia Decker, Debbie Westrick and Rob Williams. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County, [sonomamg.ucanr.edu](http://sonomamg.ucanr.edu), provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to [scmqpd@gmail.com](mailto:scmqpd@gmail.com). You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707565-2608 or [mqsonoma@ucanr.edu](mailto:mqsonoma@ucanr.edu).*