

Air-layering

This is a method of establishing roots on a 'cutting' before severing it from the parent plant. Cut right round the site where roots are required to a depth equal to the thickness of the bark. Repeat this at a point 1½ times the diameter of the branch or trunk to be rooted below (nearer to the parent roots). Remove all of the bark between the two cut rings, down to the sapwood. All of the bark must be removed as any bridges of bark left seem to curtail the formation of roots in favour of the bark growing back over the site. If you have a rooting hormone compound, this can then be applied to the higher edge of the wound.

A container for the rooting material must be on hand. This may be a sheet of clear plastic which is wrapped around the site loosely and secured with wire or twine wrapped round the lower end. This is filled with damp sphagnum moss or cuttings compost from above and the higher end again secured as before.

An alternative container can be made from a plastic pot which has a hole of the same diameter as the subject in the base. This is split down one side so that it may be opened to go round the subject and wired there to prevent it opening up again. If the latter is sited just above a side shoot which can help to support it, so much the better. This has the advantage of providing a ready potted layer when it is removed from the stock parent.

Both methods can then be further wrapped in a light excluding membrane. Black plastic is the favoured material. The latter layer can be removed at intervals to check if roots are formed without disturbing the actual root ball. Light penetration of the clear plastic turns roots back from the sides. Excluding light ensures that new roots will be there to be seen when the dark stuff is removed. If the rooting medium dries out somewhat it may be re-moistened without unwrapping by using a hypodermic syringe or one which is supplied for re-filling ink cartridges. When sufficient roots have been formed to maintain the layer it is cut away as near to the new roots as is convenient.

The plastic wrapped one will then be ready to pot up without combing out the roots or removing the material they are in. The pot enclosed one can be left undisturbed in the pot for a growing season. Both types will benefit from some shade from strong sun and wind for four to six weeks thereafter. The ideal time for air-layering is late spring to early summer. Separation from the parent timing is determined by the vigour of the new roots. Some species are much slower to respond than others.

Instead of removing a ring of bark, it is possible to restrict sap flow with a tight wire around the subject. This must cut into the bark before being covered with the rooting medium. My own preference is aluminium wire which does not rust. As I have mentioned elsewhere, in connection with holding screening over drain holes, copper wire seems to restrict root formation.