

# How to propagate *Basal cuttings*

Bob Brown explains how to propagate using this straightforward technique

## Basal cuttings

A friend admires a plant in your garden and asks for a bit, and your reply is: 'I'll dig up a bit for you.' It often works, but many plants that appear to make clumps have only tap roots, and you will find that the whole clump moves as you wrestle with the border fork. What needs to be done is to take basal cuttings. Do it immediately if your friend has green fingers and it's the right time of the year, or do it yourself and make a promise that the new plants will arrive eventually.

## Which plants suit this method?

Short basal cuttings almost always work unless the plant is a monocot (such as lilies, hostas, or anything with foliage that has more-or-less parallel veins) or a fern. You do them as the plant is beginning growth again when it's all systems go to produce roots and expand. There are few border (herbaceous) plants it doesn't work for, so it's always worth trying. However, there are many border plants that are easier to divide or lever bits from.

Digging and dividing is quicker, easier and more foolproof, so keep basal cuttings for the plants you can't divide – such as true European asters (for example *Aster x frikartii* 'Mönch'), *Campanula lactiflora* and *C. latifolia*, herbaceous clematis such as *C. recta* 'Velvet Night', dahlia, delphinium, erigeron, many euphorbia, perennial lathyrus such as *L. vernus* 'Cyaneus', perennial lobelia, hardy herbaceous salvia, scabious and many sedums.

## When to do it

Do it as the plants are beginning to grow again. For most plants this is in spring, but remember that some border perennials are summer dormant and begin to grow again in autumn.

Don't imagine that March is spring. It sometimes is, but spring often doesn't come until June, and most of the plants suited to this method of propagation respond to soil temperatures, so you need to be flexible. For the very popular *Aster x frikartii* 'Mönch', this is a problem. It's always late to come up; often it's May, but with a cold spring it will be June. Yet by the end of June it will probably have its first flowers, so the window of opportunity is very small. A diary might help, but often doesn't.

## HOW TO DO IT

Basal cuttings are used all the time for dahlias, so I include dahlias here, although lifting and forcing the plants is an unusual addition to the method. I have also shown it for a more traditional hardy herbaceous border perennial: the spring pea, *Lathyrus vernus*. These can be propagated from seed, but if you want to reproduce exactly the same kind (and some cultivars are exceptionally beautiful) basal cuttings are needed.





Wiggle the shoots to find where they are joined

Use a small knife to make the cut

## OTHER PLANTS

Write a label and put it in an old plastic bag. A date on the label can be useful. Shoots should be roughly 4-9cm high above the ground surface. Wiggle them to judge where they are joined onto the crown subsurface.

Insert the point of a small knife at this joint. You need to feel resistance as the knife enters the crown. I use my Swiss Army penknife, but a small vegetable knife will do well. Twist the blade until you hear a noise that sounds like breaking limbs and the cutting comes away.

## 2 DAHLIAS AND OTHER PLANTS

**1.** Remove the lower leaves from the cutting if they are likely to be in or on the compost when potted. If this happens, they're likely to rot and cause problems. Put the first cutting in the plastic bag with the label while you work on the next shoot.

**2.** Insert the stems about 2cm deep in small individual pots or fit them around the edge of a larger pot. With larger pots, it's a good idea to only partly fill the pot with compost. This leaves the side of the pot for support and partly encloses the cuttings, increasing humidity. Use a free-draining rooting medium with little or no added food. Too many nutrients encourage the growth of harmful bacteria in the compost.

Plain perlite or vermiculite will do as well as almost anything else. I like to use silver sand because it firmly holds the cutting once it's been watered.

**3.** Water the cuttings.

**4.** Put them anywhere with good light, a moist atmosphere and mild heat. Bottom heat (like you get with

heated propagating mats) is useful but not essential. Avoid direct sunlight and don't use enclosed propagators and plastic bags, because they make plants wet, which causes rot.

Hormone rooting compound has little or no effect. We used to use it to keep the propagator happy but have proved its ineffectiveness twice in our trials.

Dahlias root, grow on and flower quickly. It may be as little as three weeks before they'll need potting up. *Lathyrus vernus* takes up to two months to root. Most other plants lie somewhere between these two extremes.



Rooted lathyrus



Hollow (left) and solid (right) stems

## DAHLIAS

If you never lift your dahlias to overwinter them, lift one and carefully remove the majority of the soil. Put the intact tubers on, or very shallowly buried in, a tray of moist compost or garden soil somewhere warm and light.

When the shoots (which should be darkly coloured and not etiolated) are 7-8cm high, cut them off at the base, keeping a bit of basal plate if you can. Check that the base is not hollow, as hollow shoots do not root (above).

You can continue to take cuttings over several weeks or pot up the tubers to plant outside later when the danger of frost has passed.

NEXT MONTH: DIGGING UP