



PHOTOGRAPHY: JONATHAN BUCKLEY

# How to propagate *Irish cuttings*

Bob Brown explains how to propagate using this straightforward technique

## Irish cuttings

I don't believe the word 'Irish' is pejorative here, and even if it was, it would mean political correctness has gone mad. What Britain needs is a little light-hearted joshing. Basically, Irish cuttings can be described as rooted shoots (how generous of the Irish!) and are a reliable means of propagation because they already have roots! The other great advantage of using this method is that it hardly disturbs the mother plant. The baby plants can be potted up to quickly grow away.

## Which plants suit this method?

It's most suited to plants that are clumping. Clumping plants have short rhizomatous tillers: underground shoots that ultimately bear leaves. Ideally, propagate plants just before they're about to grow so that any inadvertent damage can quickly heal.

## When to do it

In January and February, I use the method for grasses such as pampas and *Stipa gigantea* (pictured, left). The latter bears tall golden grass flowers in the spring, which persist into early winter. Other perennials I propagate in this way, and at this time of year, are cultivars of *Leucanthemum x superbum*, silphium and centaureas.

Two genera particularly suited to propagation in this way are red hot poker (*Kniphofia*), which I do in late spring, and peonies, which I do just as their roots are beginning to grow again in November. This is also the best time to do galega. All three: red hot pokers, peonies and galega would suffer horribly if lifted divided and replanted. By taking Irish cuttings, this is avoided.

Pulmonarias are best done after flowering and just as the leaves begin to regrow in May. Some really tough plants, such as geranium and campanula, aren't fussy and can be propagated at any time of the year.

## HOW TO DO IT

If finding and removing these cuttings is likely to be difficult, work on making the process stress-free. Maybe put on your reading glasses so you can see more easily, take a kneeler, remove adjacent foliage to clear your view of what you are about to do, take a deep breath, then work slowly from the side; easing away soil from the place where the root joins the shoot. Remove shoots or potential shoots each with a bit of root, leaving the mother plant in situ, then pot them up.

The photographs (left) show me taking Irish cuttings of *Stipa gigantea*. In my clay soil, last year's roots are dead by January but retain their tensile strength and serve to anchor the plant. New, thicker white hairy roots are put out in early spring. Meanwhile, the dead roots can be used to keep the cutting upright in the pot. Pot them up, label them and put them in a sheltered place. Mild extra heat encourages faster rooting. Pot them on or plant them out when the new roots start growing out of the drainage holes at the base of the pot. This will be in roughly two-and-a-half months.

**1** Clear away weeping foliage that might impede your view. I use a hand fork and/or old knife to lever and prise the soil carefully away from the plant's side.

**2** Look for a newish shoot then trace its roots downwards. Free the shoot and sever its connection with the clump. For tough, congested plants, such as pampas, a very sharp spade is the tool you

need. Remember that you need to shield your face from those lethal saw-edged leaves.

**3** Put the cutting in a plastic bag while you work on the next shoot. It gets easier as more shoots are removed.

**4** Write a label and put the date when the cutting was taken.

**5** Pot them up in the smallest pots they'll fit

into. Too much space in bigger pots encourages the growth of bacteria.

**6** Put the pots somewhere light and sheltered. Avoid using heat unless it's minimal and you can give the young plants lots of attention, as both drying out and soft drawn growth can lead to losses.

**7** When they've rooted, they can be moved to bigger pots.

Next month: basil cuttings