

Godmanchester Garden Club Newsletter

April 2024



News from No. 10

News from no 10 or should I say 26A?! Spending a lot of time in Royston at the moment as our daughter and son-in-law moved there from south London before Christmas together with new grandson so no hardship! They have a good-sized garden and we were all looking forward to seeing what would emerge as the weather turned warmer. There are mature trees and shrubs with a lot of foliage beneath. We thought one bed was full of bluebells but they have turned out to be a type of wild garlic (*Allium triquetrum* - three cornered garlic or leek – photo above)! Another border is populated by a wider variety of ‘thugs’ including green alkanet (*Pentaglottis sempervirens* or even green bugloss), white dead nettle (*Lamium album*) and yet another allium, Few- Flowered garlic or leek (*Allium paradoxum* – bottom left and right) which produces tiny bulbils at the base of the short thin flower stem (each bulbil a potential new plant!). NB it is an offence under schedule 9 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act of England and Wales to plant either of these alliums in the wild they are so invasive! We are trying to remain positive and have made a batch of pesto with *Allium paradoxum* and some chopped up leaves from *Allium triquetrum* made a delicious addition to some sautéed chard last night. Predictably ground elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*) is also present but I understand that is also edible?! The bees are happy too.

I found Oscar’s talk inspiration and will definitely be trying to take semi-ripe cuttings from our ‘half - dead’ *Pittosporum* this summer.

Happy Gardening, Sue



A lively and interesting evening with Oscar from the Community Plant Nursery, with useful advice and information on taking cuttings

Oscar began with asking why we take cuttings. Cuttings make clones, not different new plants; they are good for plants which are tricky to grow from seed; the plants can be more vigorous; they are free plants; we can increase our stock; and it's fun! Just remember to be ruthless in the number of cuttings we take. As the third-generation horticulturalist in his family, Oscar had been involved with taking thousands of cuttings from his teenage years, hence his negative comments about laurel cuttings.



Oscar began by talking about the compost used in the Plant Nursery, a 50/50 mixture of Perlite, for drainage, and compost. He explained that the peat-free compost contains a lot of fibrous matter, much of it from coconut husks from India, the production of which can be problematic from an environmental point of view. The compost is therefore sieved to remove larger pieces and improve the contact between the cutting and the soil.



Oscar briefly mentioned the differences between compost with or without peat and told us he did not think it necessary to add fertiliser to softwood cuttings compost. This mixture is used for all types of cuttings.

Softwood Cuttings

Oscar had brought a small euonymus plant to demonstrate taking softwood cuttings. While professional nurseries might begin taking softwood cuttings early in the year, Oscar recommended starting now or in May. Initially using sharp scissors, he cut off several long pieces of the plant and put them into a plastic bag, explaining that cuttings should be taken when the stems are turgid and not allowed to dry out before preparing as cuttings. The best time to take cuttings is early morning or in the evening when well-watered.

To prepare the cuttings, Oscar used a sharp knife, which does not crush the cells as scissors do. He reminded us to clean our tools regularly, for which he uses hand sanitiser! The same method is used for all forms of cuttings: remove the stem just below a node, that is where a leaf is joined to the stem. This is the place where there are more hormones and stem cells which will enable root growth. Oscar then cut off the top leaves from the 4in/10cm softwood cutting. He showed us the small cell modules the Plant Nursery uses for softwood

cuttings and the milky plastic box that they put the cuttings module into to provide a humid environment and protection from bright sunlight. Several softwood cuttings can also be put into small plant pots, which can be covered with a small plastic bag, attached to the pot with an elastic band, to provide the same environment. Once the cuttings have developed a few roots (test by gently tugging on the cutting), they should be gradually exposed to drier climate, a few hours at a time.

As softwood cuttings develop quickly and are quite vigorous, they do not need hormone powder. They do, however, need labels, with the name of the plant and the date when taken, something I frequently forget! This is a good method of propagation for Fuchsia, Dianthus and bedding plants.

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/propagation/softwood-cuttings>

Hardwood Cuttings

These can be taken in winter, when Oscar claimed he can get bored. They are slow to root and have a lower success rate than softwood cuttings (around 40%) and can be used for willow (easy), cornus, fig. Using sharp bypass secateurs, Oscar had cut a long piece of fig, pencil thick, from which he cut a section 15-20cm/6-8in long, with a flat cut just below a node at the bottom and a sloping cut just above a node at the top. Oscar used the same cuttings compost in a long Tom plastic pot, burying the cutting deeply, with just one node above the compost and as many as possible below. He also suggested digging a trench in the soil and placing the cuttings in there.



<https://www.rhs.org.uk/propagation/hardwood-cuttings>

Semi-ripe cuttings

These are good for plants such as laurel, photonic, hydrangea and can be taken from mid-summer to autumn. The cutting should have slightly woody growth at the base and soft growth at the top, which is removed. Some semiripe cuttings do not root easily and may require warmth, for which Oscar suggested checking the RHS website. He also recommended using hormone rooting powder - or honey!



<https://www.rhs.org.uk/propagation/semi-ripe-cuttings>

Root Cuttings

This is an easy method which can be used from autumn to mid-winter, taking a section of thick or fleshy root and laying it in compost, for plants such as oriental poppies and primula denticulata. There is no special aftercare, lots of plants can grow from each root, the plants are relatively large and vigorous and are free from leaf pests.

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/propagation/root-cuttings>

Division of plants

Dividing plants is one of the easiest methods of creating new plants and can be done either in spring for herbaceous plants flowering later in the year, or in autumn for plants such as irises.

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/plants/types/perennials/dividing>

Basal cuttings

Oscar told us these can be done now and are good for plants that are not easy to divide. A piece of new growth should be taken from around the edge of the plant, then treated like a softwood cutting, using hormone powder to encourage growth.

There is a short section on preparing basal softwood cuttings under softwood cuttings on the RHS site.

Oscar went on to tell us about micropropagation, a method that is used to propagate high number so plants that may take a long time to multiply by traditional methods.

Micropropagation is laboratory based, requiring high levels of hygiene and factory conditions. It can take place anywhere in the world and the plants are then flown to the markets. There can be disadvantages to such plants in terms of vigour and lifespan.

There was a question about propagating clematis and Oscar told us that clematis is not to propagate from cuttings, advising using layering, either in the soil, if there is growth at that level, or using moss balls which can be wrapped around the stem and need to be kept moist.

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/propagation/layering>

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/propagation/air-layering-plants>

It was helpful to see the techniques demonstrated and to be reminded of good practice, in particular the need to keep the softwood cuttings humid, to clean and sharpen tools and to label cuttings with name and date. I took a few cuttings of different plants last year, not all of which took well, but I have a better idea now and will try again. Tell us your experiences with taking cuttings!

Josephine

