

How to air layer a houseplant

by Linda Naeve

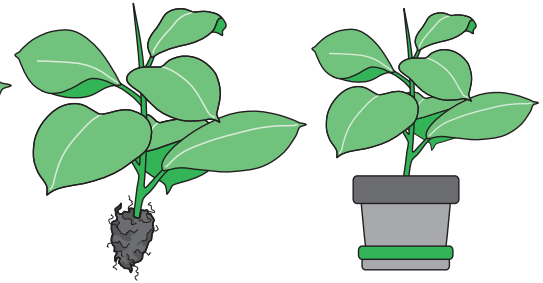
Propagating houseplants is usually an easy procedure. Simply take cuttings, or “slips,” of the new growth and place them in a rooting medium. In a few weeks they are rooted and ready to be potted. Certain tropical houseplants, however, are difficult to root from cuttings, such as the common rubber plant (*Ficus elastica*), fiddle-leaf fig (*Ficus lyrata*), dumb cane (*Dieffenbachia* spp.), croton (*Codiaeum variegatum*), and corn plant (*Dracaena* spp.). These plants are successfully propagated by **air layering**. This technique also enables gardeners to rejuvenate plants that have become tall and leggy.

Air layering is a procedure used to induce roots to form on a plant stem while it is still attached to the parent plant. Partial girdling of the plant stem interrupts the downward translocation of carbohydrates and other compounds. The accumulation of these compounds promotes rooting at the point of injury.

Materials

These are the materials you will need to air layer a houseplant (figure 1).

- Sharp knife
- Toothpick or small piece of wood
- Twist ties or cotton cord
- 8 in. x 20 in. sheet of clear plastic
- Three to four handfuls of sphagnum moss
- Water
- Rooting hormone (optional)



Procedure

Air layering is done by first wounding the plant with a cut in the stem (figure 2). Make a slanting cut into the stem. The cut should penetrate the stem to about one-fourth to one-third its diameter. Be careful to not cut entirely through the stem. Hold onto the plant above the cut so that it does not fall over and break at the cut.



Dracaena (*Dracaena deremensis*) can be successfully air layered.

Other plants that can be air layered include:



Fiddle-leaf fig (*Ficus lyrata*)



Croton (*Codiaeum variegatum*)



Dumb cane (*Dieffenbachia maculata*)



Rubber plant (*Ficus elastica*)

Keep the wound open using a small piece of wood such as a toothpick (figure 3). This is necessary to prevent the wound from healing over without forming roots. A rooting hormone can be applied by pushing it into the opened wound. The rooting hormone is optional, but it does promote more rapid root development. Purchase it from garden suppliers and garden centers.

Saturate a couple handfuls of sphagnum moss with water. Squeeze slightly to remove excess water and press the moss into a tighter mass. Wrap the damp sphagnum around the wounded area on the stem (figure 4).

Wrap a sheet of clear plastic tight around the ball of sphagnum (figure 5). Make sure none of the moss protrudes out the ends of the plastic. Use a large enough sheet of plastic to be able to go around the ball twice.



Figure 1. Materials needed to air layer.



Figure 2. Wounding the plant.



Figure 3. Placing a toothpick in the cut.



Figure 4. Placing sphagnum moss around the wounded area.



Figure 5. Wrapping plastic around the sphagnum moss.



Figure 6. Securing the wrap with twist ties.



Figure 7. Air-layered stem ready to cut off and pot.

Use twist ties or cotton cord to secure each end of the plastic snug around the stem, without injuring the stem (figure 6). Check the sphagnum ball every 7 to 10 days. If it has become light tan in color, it will need to be watered. This can be done by removing the top twist tie and pouring a little water on the sphagnum moss so that it turns dark brown in color.

Examine the plant occasionally for root development. There is considerable difference in the amount of time required for roots to form; it will depend on the plant species. Some may form roots within 30 to 60 days, while others may require 6 to 8 months. When the roots

have filled the sphagnum moss and are visible through the plastic, the newly rooted portion of the plant is ready for potting (figure 7). Remove the plastic and cut the newly rooted plant off just below the mass of roots. Loosen, but do not entirely remove the sphagnum moss. Pot the plant in a container large enough to accommodate the root system. Use a well-drained potting soil mix. Water the plant thoroughly so that the excess water drains out the hole in the bottom of the container.

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