

# In the garden with Shobha Vanchiswar



*Inside, step-by-step in photos*  
August 28, 2009

## **The shocking truth about plant propagation**

About this time every year, I start thinking “propagation.” Nothing too intricate or complicated, just simple cuttings that are rooted in small pots of good soil. I also collect seeds from plants like columbines. The ones I root are generally hydrangeas, bays, scented geraniums and myrtles. They are all very old friends that have given me company over many years. Most root cuttings I give away as gifts, but some I keep to make more plants for my garden or, to be on standby in case the old ones don’t make it through the winter. Here is my nursery of cuttings in various stages:



This year, as I prepare for this project, I'm sad, upset and outraged. Let me explain and vent and then I shall share with you how I go about making root cuttings.

The propagation of any patented and genetically modified plant either by collecting seeds, root cuttings or any other method is illegal. Yes, a fundamental practice that has been in place since we became an agrarian society is now at risk of being disallowed. One can be sued for growing any patented and genetically modified variety without a license. It means that you cannot harvest seeds from this year's plants to save for next year!

A great number of the top selling seeds are owned by the big companies who want full ownership of the product. They sell only what earns the most. They stop carrying any open-pollinated, heirloom varieties which are invariably the old-fashioned, most delicious vegetables or prettiest flowers. Hence, the selections are also being limited. I don't need to explain how limited variety and diversity of plants will impact our future. Small seed companies are trying to retain many of the old favorites. Thank goodness! But for how long before they get bought out?

The fact that any life form can be "owned" is astonishing and ridiculous. It is my personal opinion that the human race has sunk to a new low. We have successfully reached the bottom of the horticultural ethics barrel. While most of us have been busy with our day-to-day business of living, very basic rights to practice farming and gardening by the propagation of plants have been slowly

and sneakily jeopardized. Farmers, nursery owners and home gardeners are all affected. We need to pay attention to what we grow and from whom we buy our seeds and plants.

For now, what we can do is protect the heirloom varieties by collecting and saving seeds. Most urgently and importantly, each of us should join Seed Savers Exchange. This is a non-profit organization that allows rare seeds to be preserved and shared by its membership. They put out a great catalog. I implore you to become a member. <http://www.seedsavers.org/>

I wonder what founding father and gardener *extraordinaire* Thomas Jefferson would have to say on this subject? He's probably convulsing in his grave.

### ***Root cutting primer***

Now, to make root cuttings:

Cut reasonably lengthy stems of plants you wish to multiply. Cut only the green stems and avoid the woody ones.





Each length of stem can be further cut just above a leaf node. Ensure that there are at least two leaves to each cutting. You don't need to keep more than four leaves except in the case of small-leaved plants like boxwood or myrtle. So now, the cuttings are about three to four inches long.

Dip an inch of the cut end in rooting hormone powder.



Stick those ends into pots prepared with soil that has some grit added to it. Wet the soil before planting the cuttings.



Pots can be enclosed in clear plastic to create a greenhouse sort of environment. This is not essential. Just be sure to give some light and water as needed. Never let pots get too wet or dry.

When you see new growth, you will know roots have been formed. You now have more plants.

The whole process can take several weeks. Be patient.

Make more cuttings than you think you need to account for a normal failure rate. Extra plants make good gifts.

*Shobha Vanchiswar has been gardening all her life, the last 22 years in Chappaqua. She received the Golden Trowel Award for garden design in 2007 from Garden Design magazine. Her jewel-of-a-garden here in New Castle was on view in this year's Garden Conservancy Open Day program. She has a garden design business, Seeds of Design. Write her at [seedsofdesign@verizon.net](mailto:seedsofdesign@verizon.net).*