

Sept/Oct 2014 Blue Ridge Review

Jackson's Tips for Rhododendron Propagation

I've been propagating rhododendrons for over forty years, with varying success. I started while we were living in town (Greenville, SC) where I started with mainly seedlings in my garage, then expanded to the lot next door. I quickly realized that this lot did not have enough room for we bought our pre-ral property north of Since I had some ex-boxes, I offered in some of the plants, will be available at tion, and also have cuttings in process to the chapter next share some informa-ting rhododendrons



my plants, so in 1973 sent hilly, wooded ru-Travelers Rest, SC. tra space in my cutting 2013 to propagate mainly lepidotes, that the October Plant Auc-some 2014 lepidote which will be available tion about propagat-from cuttings, espe-cially for newer members. The methods I use are fairly standard, but with emphasis on low maintenance, and are not as intensive, ef-ficient or effective as those of a commercial operation.

Taking cuttings – The purpose of propagating from cuttings is to obtain new plants with the same genes as the original plants (cloning or vegetative propagation), . This may be because you have pruned branches which were growing over walks or drives (and you can't bear to waste the plant material), desire to obtain more individuals of a good plant or promising seedling, “insurance” against loss of a rare plant, obtaining new plants from others, or producing extra plants to give away. Cuttings may be taken at nearly any month in the year, but best times are in the midsummer or fall. The parent plant should be well hydrated, a day or two after watering or rain. Choose a cutting from the end of a small branch that is mature enough so the selected branch will bend with resistance up to about a 45 degree angle, but supple enough that it will not break. When you take your cutting with sharp clippers (“secateurs”), leave about a half-inch of stub on the original plant to encourage multiple branches of new growth. The stem on your cutting should be long enough so that you can stick it two or three inches into the growing medium. Place the cuttings in a plastic bag containing a small wad of moistened paper towel to maintain some temporary humidity. The cuttings may be processed immediately, or left in the refrigerator for several days. There is some evidence that refrigeration may benefit rooting, but I usually process them the same day as I am not likely to have later time available.

Keys Steps in Propagation



Selecting Cutting



Trimming leaves



Wounding cutting



Rooting Hormone

The Blue Ridge Review

Jackson's Tips for Propagation (cont.)

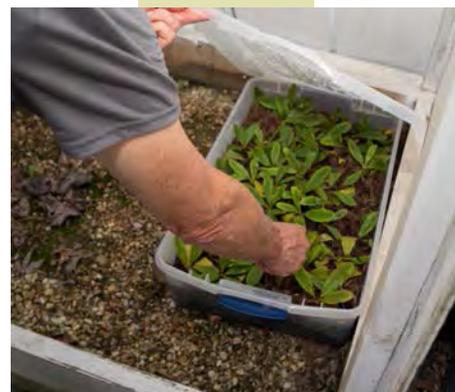
Preparing the cuttings – Trim the outer 2/3 of the leaves off with your clippers (to avoid overlapping of adjacent leaves in the cutting boxes). Next, wound the cutting so that it will later form a callus from which roots will arise. With a razor-sharp box cutter-type knife, make an angular cut about 1/3 of the way into the stem; then strip the cut down to the bottom of the stem, cutting a length-wise piece 1/3 of the width of the stem. Put this wound into the rooting hormone and shake it off. I use Hormodin #3 rooting hormone; one can will last for years.

Rooting the cuttings - I root them in clear plastic containers with drilled drainage holes: the 58-quart size (23-1/2"L x 16-7/8"W x 12-1/4"H) obtained from Walmart works best because it gives plenty of room for upward growth if potting is delayed. My growing medium is 1 to 2 inches of "soil conditioner" (composted pine bark/ compost) with 4-6 inches of "pine bark mulch" (composed of 1/2-3/4 inch pine bark flakes) on top, both obtained from Home Depot. I no longer use the standard rooting formula of 50% peat and 50% perlite because the peat either gets too dry or too soggy. The pine bark has sharp drainage and aeration; the "soil conditioner" at the bottom stays wet longer and releases water vapor that keeps the pine bark a little moist. Make holes in the pine bark with a ballpoint pen about 2-3 inches apart to receive the cuttings, depending on the size of the cuttings. Label. Water the cuttings initially, and whenever there is decreased condensation on the top of the closed plastic container. It takes about a year for these cuttings to become well rooted and suitable for potting. Some, such as yaks, may take two years. Rooting is indicated by resistance to pulling upward on the cuttings. I usually fertilize the cutting box with a half-strength soluble high phosphorus ("bloom booster") type fertilizer in the spring. In the few days prior to potting, it is a good idea to partially open the cutting box to allow the rooted cuttings to acclimate to open air.

I store the cutting-filled plastic containers in a Nearing Frame, which you can read about in David Leach's book, *Rhododendrons of the World*. The south-facing slanted part of the frame is made of aluminum. Its job is two-fold: to shelter the plants in the frame from direct sunlight and to reflect the diffused sunlight onto the plants in the next frame. (The rooting plants are stored in the open north-facing part of the frame so they get open shade, but not direct sun.) I've found that painting the aluminum with flat white paint diffuses the reflection of the light; using bare aluminum was too bright in this climate. If you don't want to build a Nearing Frame, alternatives



Cutting boxes in Nearing Frame



Rotted Cuttings



Jackson's Tips for Propagation (cont. from page 4)

are indoors under lights, north side of the house, or evergreen forest with high shade.

Potting the rooted cuttings: I potted the 2013 cuttings for the October plant auction in late August 2014. The root balls were too big for quart pots and too small for the gallons. Potting mix for these plants was 2 parts pine bark mulch and 1 part Nature's Helper, although for my plants I usually use bulk partially composted pine bark. I put them in the gallons so that the new owners could keep them outdoors about a year before they need to be planted. After potting it's good to keep them in the shade so they don't dry out.

Materials:

Secateurs	Plastic bags
Razor knife	Cutting board
Rooting hormone	Ballpoint pen
Soil Conditioner	Pine Bark Mulch
Labels	Nearing Frame
Large clear plastic storage boxes	

— *Jackson McCarter*

