

Growing Magnolias From Cuttings

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Like anyone else, I have had successes and failures in propagating magnolia by cuttings. Our statistics here at Herkenrode and now, partially, at Arboretum Wespelaar, will give an indication of what may succeed. Failures may have other reasons than intrinsic difficulty with the taxon. The results, for some 601 trials, over twenty years, 365 failures, 235 successes for some 1000 plants repotted.

Magnolia grown on their own roots will be much more vigorous. Within ten years, a graft of a good Gresham hybrid, for instance, will grow to 9.9ft (3m) whereas the cutting may have reached 14.8ft (4.5m). It is not sure that there are more flowers on the cutting and one may prefer the smaller, possibly more floriferous plant.

So, these are my suggestions for those who wish to propagate their magnolia with cuttings.

The most important thing is to buy a case of good wine, in a good oak box. Drink the wine with your friends, then if you still feel like it, fill the box, half full, with sand and peat (I once failed using perlite, but do try it again) and cover with a thin plastic sheet.

Get up early on a rainy morning and cut 8in (20cm) of new growth of your healthy, young, vigorous magnolias; this should be done some time in June, in fact, as soon as the new shoot can stand on its own (does not flop over because it is too soft).

Spray everything, first while on the propagating bench, then again in the box, with a mixture of fungicide. Be clean in all things. Fungi are lurking all over the place, especially where they were last year when you did the same thing.

Discard all but 2 or 3 leaves, cut back the leaves as much as you want, for space or any other reason (with clean scissors); make the side cut (clean knife) in the shoot (not too deep—only cambium to be shaved away) one or two sides (do experiment) or not at all (this works also!). Make a hole in medium with a clean, narrow

pencil. Dip the cutting in the rooting hormone of your choice (2% or less, IBA talc powder, but do experiment with other proportions) and place firmly in the medium [2in (5cm)] deep. Spray the base again with the fungicide—spray mist on everything and when the box is full, cover the cuttings with plastic. Other boxes are fine (polyurethane boxes are light and strong) but do use new clean boxes every year.

During the first weeks you may want to spray twice a day, morning and evening. It is sufficient to mist very lightly, no need to pour any water on the medium (there are no roots at this stage). Later, spray once or twice a week. Never soak the medium. The leaves should never dry during the first weeks. Any rotting leaves or stems should be removed immediately; clean your fingers before touching anything else.

After six weeks, start foliar feeding, while still applying fungicide. We spray one a week, with a mixture of foliar feed plus fungicide; someone told me that we should not make such cocktails—he may be right.

Do not place the boxes in full sun, but give as much light as possible. Temperature: 64–75 °F (18 to 24 °C), I guess.

Check regularly (twice a week) for rotting leaves and rotting stipules (big nuisance). Get rid of them as soon as they appear on the bud of the young growth.




Once the cuttings have rooted and produced new shoots, try to keep your cuttings growing on well throughout the autumn. You may want to start raising the plastic sheet somewhat to let more air in the “tent.” You will quickly see the un-rooted cuttings dry up! You may have to raise the plastic sheet to allow more space for the successful cuttings.

Do not hesitate to pull out the cutting and check on how they are proceeding; if they are rooted you will feel a resistance and yes you may break a weak single root on a marginal cutting. But you will have set ten in a row anyhow. Those with a callus or small shoot you can just put back in the media; no harm done. If they haven't set roots after eight weeks they will never make it through the winter.

The trickiest moment for the cuttings is the time of potting up. Because we are too busy in September and October, we leave the

cuttings in the bed or boxes until February, when there is nothing else to do in the garden. But this is not the right time; it is often said that one should move cuttings when the plant is growing or at least not totally dormant. So, ideally September or March (and of course summer—yes you can do it, under plastic). But no one has time in those months! So, we repot in February. We repot in a mixture of loam and leaf mold. Unless heavily fed, magnolias do not grow well in peat and sand; remember, they like heavy acid, loam. The repotted plants go back under the plastic tent.

urviving plants are put outside in mid May, in the shade, out of drafts and possibly planted in the nursery (best growing conditions).

Lately we have been somewhat careless and we have been less successful, with fungus appearing in the soil (we were heating too much), or moss on the medium and the base of shoots blackening from fungus. Also, we make cuttings throughout the summer from May to September and treated everyone in the same way, in the same bed.

This is amateur work. But we do this for fun. Anyhow, we end up with too many plants, of course not the ones we wanted. But some times you have good surprises. For instance, while visiting a brewery in Korea, I collected *Magnolia sieboldii* along the road (in Sorak san) brought them back in a plastic bag (standing!) and set them in the boxes only four days later, with some success.

Standing! I have this funny superstition that you should hold your freshly collected shoots vertically while traveling. Of course they should not dry and not rot. But in fact, when you have set them in the boxes nothing much happens for the first week. The cutting must start building up the callus at its base (that enlarged, hardened base from which roots will eventually sprout). I think that there is no need to be in the boxes for that process to start.

Now it might be useful to prepare the cuttings in the field, specially if you have several days before reaching the propagating bed, dip the freshly cut shoots in the rooting medium immediately, cut them ready for inserting in the boxes and then hold them upright while traveling home in the easy zipper plastic bags. There is really no hurry, just keep them cool, slightly wet and upright. I wish I had tried with half the cuttings upside down and the other half standing to see if my idea is correct.

Coming back to individual magnolias, the easy ones are: all *M. liliiflora* cultivars and crosses (the Gresham Brunettes, 'Royal Crown,' 'Galaxy,' 'Spectrum.' *Magnolia denudata* hybrids are also fine. Unfortunately the *M. sargentiana* and *M. dawsoniana* hybrids are not easy. *M. campbellii* is not good, unless crossed with *M. liliiflora* again. Most *Magnolia* in the Buergeria section strike well, none of the Rhytidospermum. Other good ones : 'Anne Rosse,' 'Big Dude,' 'David Clulow,' 'Forrest's Pink,' 'Hot Lips,' 'JC McDaniel,' 'Wada's Memory,' *M. sieboldii*, 'Star Wars.' I have noticed that late summer is better for *M. grandiflora* as it is for many evergreen shrubs. ~

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