

HAVE YOU TRIED HARDWOOD CUTTINGS?

By George Bartlett

When glancing through the pages of an old gardening book I came across the recommendation that fuchsia cuttings should be taken in late autumn, after the first frost, and left in a cold frame, over winter, in order to root.

I re-read the article just to make sure that what I had seen in the first instance was correct. It appears that this method was used by the Victorian gardeners in order to have fairly large rooted cuttings of plants that would be used in hedging and in the hardy border. If it was a viable proposition at the start of this century why should it not be successful now? So, I delved deeper. As a result I decided to try this old-fashioned method to see if it really works.

When plants in my hardy border had experienced their first severe frost and had become denuded of foliage the time was obviously right to carry out my experiment. The leaves had been removed quite naturally so there would be no injuring of the stems that would have undoubtedly occurred if I had carried out the defoliating myself.

I removed half a dozen stems from each plant in my border and trimmed them back so that they were approximately a foot in length (10cm). I decided to treat each of the stems (actually I prefer to call them sticks) in different ways to be really scientific. The first of the sticks was simply pushed into the 3 1/2" pot of my usual compost. (50/50 mix of my usual multipurpose compost and vermiculite—I could have used perlite but as I usually use Vermiculite for cuttings I thought I would continue to do so). As all of the six cuttings were to be in the same pot, each cutting was placed near the edge of the pot.

The second cutting was dipped in hormonal rooting powder. (I don't usually use this sort of aid but as they were hardwood cuttings, I felt that they would need all the assistance possible).

The third cutting was dipped into a rooting liquid (because somebody had told me somewhere that the liquid was better than the powder).

The next three cuttings were dealt with, each in the same way, but before inserting them in the compost or the hormonal powder or liquid I gently wounded the end of each by tapping it with a sharp hobby knife. This tapping, actually I call it stippling but that is simply a word that seemed to me to fit the bill at the time, just cut through the bark so the hormones under the skin of the bark would be exposed. The first 'stippled' cutting was simply pushed into the compost, the second dipped into the hormonal powder, (actually it was very satisfying seeing the powder sticking to the 'wound' lines) and the third was dipped into the hormonal liquid. Each cutting had been carefully labeled so that I would know what process had been adopted for each.

After watering in, the pots were placed in a tray and were then put in the corner of a small greenhouse, out of direct sunlight, which would be kept frost free through the winter.

Time passed by and with the approach of early spring it was discovered that buds along each of the stems were beginning to break and fresh green shoots were emerging. By the end of April the growths were of sufficient length to be used for soft green tip cuttings if required. (The plants from which they had been taken were not showing any growth from the base so an early supply of cutting material was available by this method).

I suppose that at this stage I should have removed the plants from the pots to examine the root systems and to discover the method which gave the best root system. I am afraid that I

did not do so as I was anxious to take them to my talks so that others could see the success of this method. Sufficient to say that each and every hardwood cutting that was taken had rooted. The experiment was actually an abject failure as I could not tell you which had been the best rooting method, but it was a great success in that they had all rooted and would make good young plants.

Actually, I never did separate the cuttings from each other but left them as a group of six in each of the pots. Root room was undoubtedly going to be a problem quite quickly with this number of plants so each potful was transferred onto an eight inch pot so that they could continue to grow. They produced superb pots of fuchsias for me and could easily have been used as plants in the garden as they were of good size to be planted out during the month of June.

So, in the autumn or early winter when your plants have been defoliated by the first severe frost, you might consider using some of the trimmings from your plants as hardwood cuttings. (I know we don't encourage the cutting back of hardy plants as the stems do give some protection from frosts in winter—but the odd half dozen will not be missed). A simple method that works with a minimum of attention and anxiety. As an afterthought, what a simple way of sending cutting material through the post, no anxiety about keeping the material turgid, no great weight of compost with rooted cuttings-just a bundle of sticks which will be transformed into superb young plants in the spring.

There's nothing new in the world of fuchsias-if it worked for our Victorian ancestors with their cold frames precariously resting on hot beds, then it will work for us. Good Luck

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