



## **Gardening For Free (Almost)**

What are the options when your gardening dreams exceed the resources available to pay for them? The usual suggestions include buying small plants and waiting for them to grow, buying discounted plants at end-of-season sales (great bargains but limited selections), haunting community plant sales, and trading with friends. All have possibilities, but none really fit your needs when you need specific plants for a specific plan.

This reality came home to me recently, when I decided to redesign my courtyard. A succession of health issues and family obligations, plus a few more birthdays, have made it clear that, however hard it is to admit, it's time to cut down the amount of upkeep required. I'm planning to yank some perennials, especially non-natives, and replant with something less demanding. It has to be native, low-growing, have at least three seasons of interest, and like lots of sun. After some research, I settled on bearberry. Glossy evergreen-ish foliage for winter, tiny pink flowers in spring, red berries in winter (or until the critters finish them off), and only 6 inches tall. Perfect! I'll need about fifty.

Yikes.

Grow them from seed? Not likely. Bearberry, it turns out, is notoriously difficult from seed, requiring both scarification (scratching its very hard seed coat) and stratification (extended exposure to cold). It can take eighteen months to germinate, if it germinates at all. Gardening has taught me patience, but not that much patience.

Well, perhaps I could buy one or two plants, and propagate from cuttings? After all I took a class on just that. We chose strong stems from hydrangeas, removed most of the leaves, dipped the stems in rooting hormone, and stuck them into a mix of perlite and peat. Each had its own tiny 'greenhouse,' a 2-liter soda bottle cut across the middle and reassembled after the cutting is planted inside, to keep it moist. Some weeks later, all mine had rooted. Piece of cake. And some plants develop roots in a glass of water, or when a cut piece is simply stuck into the earth. So how hard can it be?

But, again, bearberry dashed my dream of easy multiplication. Again, that ominous phrase “notoriously difficult” entered the search. I looked for as many sources of advice as possible, for each step.

Some plants root more easily from soft spring cuttings, others from hardened fall stems. Success with bearberry, apparently, happens most often with late summer cuttings, so I haven’t missed this season’s opportunity yet.

Obviously, gardeners managed to root cuttings without the aid of hormone powder in centuries past. Natural alternatives include aloe vera gel and willow ‘tea’ (water steeped in willow cuttings for 24 hours—makes sense; willow will root on its own if I stick it in a vase and forget about it for a week or two). But I’m trying to maximize my chances, so rooting hormone it is.

Even so, there’s more to consider. A difficult-to-propagate plant like bearberry may root more easily if a cutting is taken with a ‘heel,’ a bit of the main stem at the point where the cutting branches off. That intersection is a natural growth point. Or I could try ‘layering,’ which encourages the plant to send out new roots while it’s still attached to, and receiving nutrients from, the mother plant. Ordinary layering is pretty simple: scrape off a bit of the outer layer to expose the cambium, dust on the rooting hormone, and push the treated bit—preferably at an intersection—into the ground. Pin it down with a convenient rock to hold it in place, and forget about it for a while. Once roots form, the new plant can be cut away.

‘Air layering’ works, too. It’s pretty much the same process as regular layering, except it’s done, well, in the air: instead of being pushed into the ground, the treated bit is packed with damp peat moss, wrapped with foil or plastic wrap and brown paper, and again, left to its own devices for weeks or months. But that method is intended for larger plants, not something with stems the diameter of thread, only six inches from the ground. No, I think I’ll stick to the soda bottles.

To be honest, I’m getting antsy just writing about it. Perhaps I’ll bypass the whole process, chuck frugality, and simply order a tray of plugs. All the nurseries I checked are out of stock right now, so I’ll have to wait a while. But that will give me time to clear out the courtyard, so it all works out for the best.