

Givin' you the dirt - Air Layering

By SEAN JAMES N.P.D.

I have a ubiquitous giant house-plant looming in the corner. I've debated cutting it back or throwing it out. I've even thought of offering it to the library or hospital.

Realistically, this is half philanthropy and half guilt at the prospect of killing a plant bigger than I am. Plants this big are almost always sentimental hand-me-downs or VERY expensive.

I know I'm not alone with this moral burden. Please allow me to share the solution with you - air layering

Air layering seems almost supernatural to me but it works. Look at the height of the plant and determine how tall you want it to be. I would concentrate on the tallest or most unruly stem. You can reduce the height of the stem as much as you like while creating a new plant.

Pop out to a garden center and pick up some rooting hormone for softwood such as "Rootone No. 1," as well as some sphagnum moss. Find a piece of clear plastic, maybe 12 inches squared. Have a toothpick and two elastics on hand and a very sharp knife, which you will handle carefully...right?

Now you're ready. Soak the moss in water. Pour a bit of the hormone powder into a spoon. Carefully cut half way through the stem at a ninety-degree angle to the direction of growth, as if you were cutting down a tree.

Support the stem with your other hand carefully the whole time so it doesn't snap. Put down the knife and gently bend back the top of the stem just far enough to fit the toothpick in.

If it's too tight, cut the stem a bit more - but no more than a third. Dip the toothpick in hormone and dust the inside and edges of the cut just lightly dusted. In fact, lightly blow any extra powder off the cut. Stick the

toothpick into the cut sideways...like a dog carries a bone. This keeps the cut open until roots form.

Now the hard parts are done. You're about to make a plastic, moss stuffed bubble around the cut. Try visualizing that.

Using an elastic, tie the plastic around the stem an inch below the cut, leaving some overlap. Slowly stuff the moss around the cut and the stem, wrapping the plastic around it as you go.

Once you're an inch or so above the cut, finish closing the bag and tie it off with the other elastic. You should end up with a globe of moss around the stem with the treated cut in the centre, hidden by moss.

Don't worry if it looks pretty. It is only meant to keep the stem lightly moist. (Read that slowly and logically. It makes sense...really...I hope.) The bag should have no big openings and an overlap on the seam of maybe an inch or so.

The only remaining trick is to keep the sphagnum moss from drying out until you see several white roots growing inside the bag. Water it slowly and carefully at the top of the bag whenever it looks like it might dry out. It may take a few months. At this point, remove the bag and cut through the stem below the new roots. Plant this new plant in its own pot or at the base of the original to make it more full.

The old stem you just cut should produce a new shoot near the top. You're done! Now just water it like you would any houseplant.

Schefflera, Dieffenbachia, and corn plant and dragon tree (Dracena) are all candidates for air layering. Don't try it with banana plants. Cacti are a whole other story.

This method can also just be used for propagating new plants.

This is a fairly complex process but don't be afraid. Just give it a try and good luck.

If you have questions of a horticultural nature, e-mail me at sdames@on.aibn.com.

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Harold Allison would like to thank family, relatives, friends and neighbours for coming to help celebrate his 80th Birthday at his daughter's home on November 3. Mr. Allison was pleasantly surprised with the plaque presented to him by Mayor Krantz and Councilor Cindy Lumua recognizing his special day.

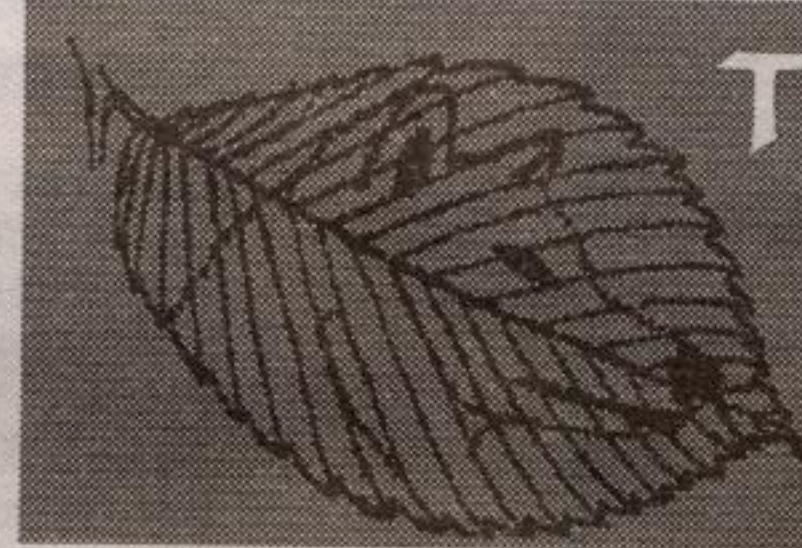
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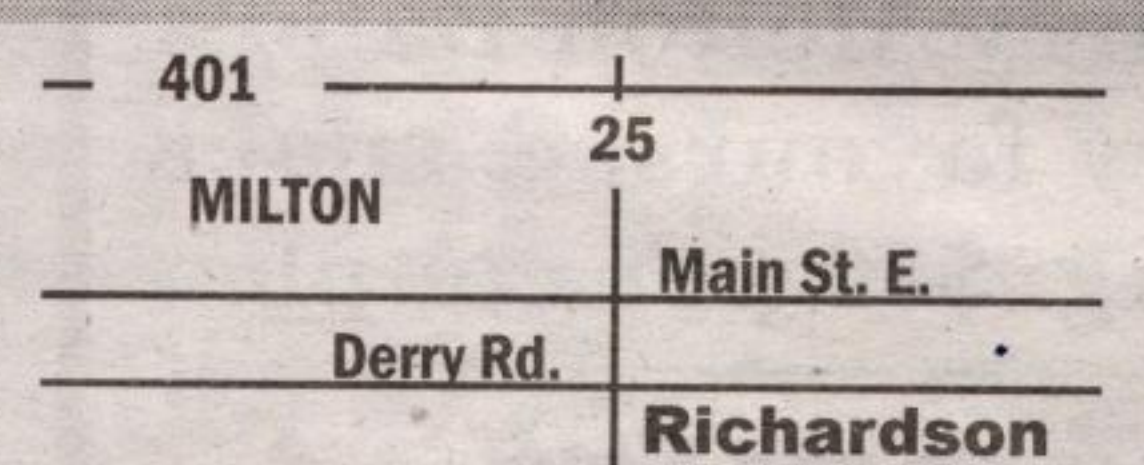
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