

Fail-Proof Cuttings

by Robbie Tucker, owner of Rosemania.com

Over the years I have tried to propagate roses by taking cuttings with varying degrees of success. Mostly it was a frustrating experience. The fall of 1993 I discovered something that changed all that.

I had made an indoor greenhouse for my seedling crop of 1993. Since Marsha and I had not yet built our outside greenhouse, it was necessary for me to give the seedlings a place to grow as they germinated throughout the winter.

Building an indoor greenhouse is easy. All you need is an area to grow your plants where temperature can be controlled, (This can be a closet, basement, attic, spare room, etc.) and at least one pair of fluorescent grow lights. I used an oversized closet in the guest bedroom. The walls and floor were covered with 4mil. plastic to protect them from water. (thumb tacks work great to hold the plastic on the walls) I used concrete blocks to slightly raise the plywood table off the floor. The lights were then hung from the ceiling by light-weight chains so that they could be raised as the roses grew.

Marsha and I had already made our list of miniatures we wanted to purchase and exhibit in 1994. We had plenty of room in our indoor greenhouse, so I picked up the telephone in December and ordered several plants from Dennis and Suzy Bridges. They arrived and thrived (poet) under the lights and we soon realized that we would like a couple more plants of a few of the varieties that showed exhibition potential. That's when we stumbled into the process of trying cuttings under lights.

I used the conventional method of preparing the cutting. I cut the stem of a spent bloom, 3 - 4 bud eyes (leaves) down. The bloom and all the leaves were removed except for the top two sets. I removed the outside layer of the stem, up one inch from the bottom. This is accomplished by taking a sharp knife and gently scraping the stem. (Do not scrape hard. You only want to remove the dark- green outside layer.) I then placed the prepared cutting in water to soak while I prepared the pot.

I use disposable plastic drinking cups for pots. With a knife, I make three holes on the outside/bottom edge for drainage. I then fill the cups with my planting medium. This can be a variety of things from peat moss, potting soil, 1/2 sand and 1/2 peat, a seed starter mix, or your own special recipe. (I use sterile seed starting medium.) Once the cups are filled I take plenty of time to make sure they are properly saturated with water. Some planting mediums will not take water all that easily at first. I usually place my pots in a pan or the sink and first fill from the top. I also let water absorb through the bottom holes of the cup by running an inch or so of water directly into the pan.

Once the soil in the cups is well saturated, I use a pencil to make a hole in the center of the soil approximately two inches deep. I then take the prepared cutting from the water and dip the scraped end into a rooting hormone such as Rootone. Tap off excess hormone and then place the cutting in the hole you just made with your pencil. Take your fingers and press down the earth around the cutting and then add a small amount of water to the top of the cup to make sure the cutting is surrounded by earth. Your cutting is almost ready.

You will want to use some method to mark what variety you are propagating. This can be done with plastic markers that you can buy from the nursery, popsicle sticks, or just by writing on the side of the cup. Next take a one gallon zip-lock bag and insert the cup with cutting. You can easily get two cups into one bag and the bags can be used over and over again. (At this point, I usually spray a small amount of fungicide into the bag.) Seal the bag and place it under the grow lights, with the light bulbs approximately four (4) inches from the top of the bag. That's all there is to it! Forget about your cuttings for four weeks. At the end of four weeks take them out of the bags and continue to leave them under the lights until they bloom. (Do not fertilize until they have either bloomed or have significant growth.)

My success rate with this method has been over 90%. It's a lot of fun and a great way to add those hard-to-find roses to your garden. Good luck!