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CULTIVATED GARDEN LIVING

Rooting Cuttings in Water

Tips, Techniques & Best Practices

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Vessel Size — Crowded vs. Roomy

Slightly crowded tends to work better than a large open vessel for most cuttings. When stems are snug against the glass or each other, it creates a mild stress that encourages rooting. More importantly, crowding the vessel reduces the ratio of water to stem — which means the water stays fresher longer and is slower to stagnate.

A narrow-necked bottle or jar where the stems fit snugly is ideal — a vintage milk bottle, a tall bud vase, or even a simple mason jar. Wide open bowls with a large volume of water tend to go murky faster and invite rot.

That said, don't pack them so tightly that stems are crushed or water cannot circulate at all. Snug — not stuffed.

Light — What They Need

Bright indirect light is the sweet spot for both soft and hardwood cuttings. A north- or east-facing windowsill is ideal.

Avoid direct sun. It warms the water, promotes algae growth, and stresses the cutting before it has any roots to support itself. Once you see good root development, you can gradually move toward more light.

How Long Does It Take?

Begonias (soft stem): Fast. Roots can appear in as little as 7–14 days under good conditions.

Annabelle Hydrangeas (woody stem): Considerably slower. Expect 3–6 weeks, sometimes longer. Patience is everything with hardwood. Take cuttings in late spring to early summer when new growth is still somewhat soft but not floppy — this gives the best results. Fall hardwood cuttings can root but take much longer and have a lower success rate.

What to Do With the Leaves

Leaf management is one of the most important — and most overlooked — parts of water rooting. Here is what works best:

- **Remove all leaves below the waterline immediately.** Any submerged foliage will decompose rapidly, foul the water, and invite rot to travel up the stem. This is non-negotiable.
- **Leave the top foliage intact when possible.** The leaves above water are actively photosynthesizing and sending energy down toward the cut end, which is exactly what drives root initiation. Stripping all leaves removes that energy source and slows rooting.
- **For large-leaved cuttings — like big begonia leaves or hydrangeas with oversized foliage — cut each remaining leaf in half crosswise.** This reduces the surface area losing moisture through transpiration, which the cutting cannot yet replace without roots. Cutting leaves in half is a well-established propagation practice and does not harm the cutting.
- **For small-leaved or naturally compact cuttings,** leave the foliage whole. Cutting small leaves is unnecessary and creates extra wound sites.

The general rule: keep leaves that are above water and working for you. Remove anything that touches the water. Reduce leaf size only when leaves are large enough to cause moisture stress.

Essential Tips for Success

Use room-temperature water. Cold tap water straight from the faucet slows root development noticeably. Let it sit for a bit or use water that has come to room temperature.

Change the water every 3–5 days. This is the single most important habit. Change it whenever it starts to look cloudy, even if fewer than 5 days have passed. Stale water means rot.

Try the willow trick. Drop a small piece of any willow branch — stem or leaves — into the water. Willow naturally contains indolebutyric acid, the same compound in commercial rooting hormone. It genuinely encourages rooting and is a lovely old garden practice.

Use dark or opaque vessels to slow algae. Clear glass is beautiful and lets you watch the roots develop, but algae grows faster in it. If algae becomes a problem, switch to a colored or opaque vessel — or simply keep the clear glass out of any direct light.

Pot up at the right moment. Once roots are one to two inches long, move the cutting to soil. Do not wait until the roots are long and tangled — water roots are brittle and transplant poorly once they have grown too long. One to two inches is the sweet spot.

Make a clean angled cut. Always take your cutting with a clean, sharp blade at a 45-degree angle just below a leaf node. A clean cut reduces the chance of rot and gives the maximum surface area for roots to emerge.