

# *Garden practice* Tender cuttings

Tender perennial displays are peaking, so think about which you intend to save for next year... and take cuttings

Author: **Nick Morgan**, Horticultural Specialist at RHS Garden Wisley.  
Photography: **Tim Sandall**



*‘Tender perennial’* is the term for a diverse group of plants including herbaceous perennials, shrubs and trees. They offer a varied range of flowers and foliage and are valued for planting into summer borders and containers, sustaining a border display into late autumn.

Unfortunately, as ‘tender’ suggests, these plants are not tough enough to survive cold, wet UK winters unprotected. There are several options for retaining plants: taking cuttings, protecting them *in situ*, or bringing them under cover.

Taking cuttings

You can replace large, specimen plants such as *Brugmansia*, oleander and shrubby *Solanum rantonnetii* by propagating semi-ripe cuttings in late summer (see right). Many tender perennials such as salvias, heliotropes, pelargoniums and fuchsias can be treated as annuals and regenerated each year from greenwood (or semi-ripe) cuttings in autumn or soft tip cuttings in spring (see below right). When selecting cutting material, choose plants with the best attributes, and ensure the material is pest and disease free.

Protection in situ

In milder areas you can bring some tender perennials through most winters by insulating from the cold. For example, *Musa* (banana) stems can be wrapped up with layers of straw, while cannas and other dormant rhizomatous and bulbous subjects can be mulched deeply to insulate the ground from penetrating frosts.

Protection indoors

Alternatively, you can lift plants in late autumn, before any frosts, and move them to the refuge of a frost-free glasshouse, porch or even a window-sill. They should be cleaned up and trimmed or pruned back. The plants you lift from the garden or remove from containers can be boxed up or potted into a free-draining growing medium.

During this resting period it is important to slow or prevent regrowth, which would be weak and spindly. Plants that remain in leaf should be positioned in bright, airy situations, but kept cool – ideally around 5–7°c (41–45°f). Water sparingly to just keep the growing medium from drying out. For dormant or hard-pruned plants without leaves, light is not critical until growth restarts in early spring. Remove fallen and yellowing leaves, and trim back any shoots or branches that show signs of dying back over winter. ●

[www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk) For more on propagating tender perennials, search ‘Tender perennials: cuttings’ and ‘Softwood cuttings’ on RHS Online.



Taking cuttings in summer

If you want large ‘specimen’ plants for next summer, take cuttings in July or August. This gives time for woody plants such as *Abutilon*, *Brugmansia* or oleander plants to grow on before growth slows in the declining temperatures and daylight of late autumn. Slow-growing succulents such as *Aeonium* are also best propagated in summer.

Depending on the species, choose stems to make cuttings about 10cm (4in) long. They need to have enough substance in leaf and stem to support the development of new roots. Many tender perennials flower up to the first frost, and it can be difficult to find non-flowering shoots for cuttings, so simply pinch out any flower buds.

Collect soft, leafy cuttings such as *Solenostemon* and *Penstemon* in the morning and place in a polythene bag to reduce wilting (you can store them in bags in the fridge for 24 hours). Root your cuttings into modules or insert them around the edge of a pot: the rooting medium needs to be open and free draining. Filled pots and containers can be put into a propagator, a polythene tunnel or a polythene bag. Rooting takes about two or three weeks; then pot on into 9cm (3½in) pots. Overwinter in a cool, bright, airy spot, keeping the growing medium just moist.

Taking cuttings in spring

From overwintered plants:

Another opportunity to propagate tender perennials occurs in spring. As light levels improve in February, stimulate overwintered plants into making plenty of new growth by pinching out the tips of the growing shoots. Increasing watering and adding a balanced feed assists the process.

When the new growth is long enough, take soft tip cuttings of about 5cm (2in). You can insert these into modules or around the edge of a pot, just as for summer cuttings (above). A heated propagator aids rapid rooting. This type of spring propagation is great for quick-growing subjects for bedding out en masse or for filling containers. Examples are *Helichrysum*, *Alternanthera*, *Solenostemon* and *Verbena*.

Spring propagation avoids holding many small plants over winter, saving energy and reducing losses from diseases such a grey mould (botrytis).



Step-by-step guide to taking cuttings now

**1 Collecting cutting material:** choose clean, healthy, ideally non-flowering shoots (here of *Osteospermum*). Depending on subject, strong, firm growth about 10cm (4in) long is ideal. Make a clean cut with a sharp knife or secateurs, and transport them in a polythene bag. This ensures they remain turgid and do not dry out.



**3 Rooting environment:** insert cuttings to approximately half their length into an open, free-draining growing medium. Allow space between the cuttings. Water them in thoroughly, then place in a propagator, polythene tunnel, or stretch a clear polythene bag over individual pots. Place in good light, but not direct sunlight.



**2 Preparing cuttings:** trim shoots (and remove flowers) to the required length by cutting the stem just below a leaf node. With a sharp knife carefully remove any lower leaves that may hinder insertion into the growing medium. Trim foliage of large-leaved plants to reduce water loss: halve each remaining leaf. A hormone rooting agent improves success with some subjects.

**4 Rooted cuttings:** wean rooted cuttings from the propagation environment by moving them to a light, airy position (but shade from strong sunlight if necessary). Pot on into an open, free-draining medium and water in. Continue watering as needed until the cutting is established in its pot, then keep the growing medium just moist.



From new plants:

In early spring, garden centres and nurseries offer a wide range of tender perennial ‘starter’ plants. This provides gardeners with a great opportunity to grow the latest introductions. Another big advantage is that, by buying in young plants, gardeners do not need to provide the resources or manage the risks associated with overwintering plants. Starter plants also have the potential to increase your plant numbers, as they are usually well-rooted cuttings that usually have been pinched out so are already growing three or more new shoots. After potting on, these plants usually need further pinching - and these shoots tips can be perfect cutting material. After rooting, pot up cuttings singly, pinch out and grow on as outlined above. Alternatively, if a larger plant is needed, pot three rooted cuttings (of the same cultivar) into one pot and treat as a single plant.