

Airlayer to renew indoor plants

Over time, many indoor tropical plants grow taller, losing leaves along the stem. After many years the plant develops a snake-like trunk with a blossom of leaves only at the newest end. This can occur with dracena, dumbcane, umbrella, fig and many other plants. As the plant takes over, you may feel guilty cutting the plant back though the stem is too long. The answer is to airlayer the plant, turning a lanky plant into a compact plant.

Airlayering is a propagation, or regrowth, technique that is used to generate roots on the stem or trunk. The plant is then cut below the new roots resulting in two plants. It works well with most houseplants and is a good winter project for both adults and children.

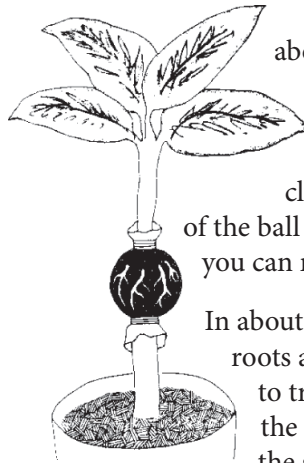
Tools

To airlayer, you will need a plant from 2 to 20 feet tall with one or several branches. Your supplies should include a sharp knife, powdered rooting hormone, sphagnum (often referred to as decorative moss), clear plastic and twist ties. When rooting is complete, you will need a new pot and potting soil.

Airlayering

Select an area 5 to 6 inches below the lower leaves. Cut a thin layer of bark on two sides of the trunk, exposing the cambium, or growing layer of the stem. The cut should be about ½ inch to 1 inch long. Use a tool to thickly rub powdered rooting hormone on the shallow cut. Rooting hormone often contains a fungicide, so it is important not to get it on your skin.

Thoroughly wet the sphagnum moss in a bowl of water. Slightly wring out and place it around the portion of the stem where the cuts were made. The ball of moss will be



about 4 inches in diameter around the stem and 6 inches tall. For rooting to occur, the cut area must be kept wet. This is done by wrapping the sphagnum moss ball with clear plastic and securing it on top and bottom of the ball with the twist ties. Clear plastic is used so you can monitor the moisture level and look for roots.

In about three to five months you will notice fleshy roots at the side of the plastic wrap. This is the time to transplant the new plant. Cut the stem below the sphagnum moss ball. Gently remove most of the sphagnum moss and repot the rooted top in the fresh soil and new pot. To encourage a stockier plant, prune off the top growing shoot.

Rejuvenate the bottom

The bottom stalk, lacking leaves, will look bad and hopeless, but do not despair. Given a little water and lots of light, it will sprout a new crop of leaves along the stem near the top. It may take from one to several months to generate new leaves. After the plant has grown for awhile and been given time to build up the reserves it needs, you can airlayer the plant again if necessary.

Another option is to repot the airlayer top and bottom in a large pot together. In this situation, take the older plant out of the pot and trim back the curved and tangled roots. Then pot together.

Keep in mind that most tropical plants grow best in strong, filtered light with high humidity. If a plant does not get adequate light, it will grow weak. A weak plant will not thrive and will root more slowly. If you are preparing to propagate a plant, make sure it is in the best health, since a healthy plant roots quicker.

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