



This Year's Top Gardening Hints
By Paula Bertram
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Despite the chilly winter weather, the Veterans Hall was filled to overflowing on a recent Saturday for the new UC Extension Class: Top 20 Gardening Hints. Enthused gardeners heard Master Gardeners Sheri Burke, Mike Pizza and Sue McDavid expound on inexpensive, time saving and imaginative techniques. The topics ranged from a do-it-yourself rain gauge made from a pop bottle, to how to keep a poinsettia thriving year after year. So much information, so little column space---the writer's dilemma. Here are a few enlightening ideas.

1. "Whack a Plant." Yes, you read right. This requires a little background, so bear with me. Sheri Burke aka "The Seed Queen" explained the basics of successful seed starting: types of soil media to use, watering techniques (less is more), and container choices. When the seedlings have sprouted and grown to 3 or 4 inches with several leaves, they will benefit by a daily "whacking." NOT with a baseball bat or anything, but a light slapping with the back of the hand, bending the stems slightly with each whack. The more tenderhearted gardener can substitute a few minutes with an electric fan. The idea is to stimulate stem strength and plant vigor by gently stressing the young plant with movement.
2. FREE PLANTS (!) No, not as in "Free the Plants" from subjugation, but instead multiplying your supply without having to buy them. According to Sue McDavid, there are numerous methods of propagation but hardwood cuttings are one of the easiest. And it's something you can do right now in the winter.

First, select a plant that you covet---say your mother-in-law's oak leaf hydrangea, or your neighbor's forsythia. Or, select a plant in your own garden that your friend admired and make her a present---for free!

Next, cut one of those long dry stems down to the ground. Avoid both the very bottom and the tip, and trim a piece that contains 3 nodes (nodes are those little lumps along the stem where eventually leaves or blossoms will happen). Dip the lower end in rooting compound; poke it into a hole in a pot of moist coarse sand, covering the bottom nodes.

Now wait. For months. When leaves and roots sprout in the spring, replot into regular potting soil or plant into the garden directly... and you have a new plant for yourself or to gift someone else.

3. Homemade vases. If you are like MG Mike Pizza, you enjoy taking flowers from your garden to share with friends. But, admit it, wrapping them in damp newspaper or sticking them in a Bud Light can lacks a certain cachet. So here's what Mike does: take an empty pop bottle, potato chip can, or Crystal lite jar. Wrap it up in fabric scraps, interesting wrapping paper or (for taller containers) a bamboo-type place mat. Glue this on with a glue gun. Voila—a vase that complements those gorgeous bouquets that you've grown.

Plan to attend a very popular Master Gardener class this Saturday, February 23rd in The Veteran's Memorial Building at 9:00 AM: Spring and Summer Vegetables. Master Gardener Zack Dowell will help you prepare the garden for delicious spring and summer vegetables, and discuss garden plant selection, planting times, garden site selection, soil preparation, proper seed planting techniques, and pest management.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.