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A cut off the old stock

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By Alex Féthière

Photo in the print edition: These Himalayan honeysuckle cuttings can grow into 10-foot tall bushes in a couple of years.
(Journal photo by Alex Féthière)

It's easier to think of our plants as humans than as amoeba. They grow, express feelings and many reproduce by fertilized seeds — coarsely analogous to how we do. But if I cut off a finger, I can't plant it to get a new me.

It should be more intuitive that cloning is instrumental to our horticultural world. The apples beloved by our culture are reproduced in this manner: scion wood grafted on to rootstock. Every Honeycrisp apple is a genetic copy of the original Honeycrisp apple, as every Cavendish banana is cloned from the original Cavendish banana, usually by the division of root suckers from a banana plant's base.

Speaking of replicating plants by division, consider the Himalayan honeysuckle (*Leycesteria formosa*). These two massive clusters of upright canes with burgundy bracts drooping white bell-flower chains have come to define my driveway.

If that weren't enough, the flowers form dark-chocolate colored berries with a taste of burned toffee. Some folks love it, some are indifferent, and some have a problem with the texture but love the flavor. In any event, they're fidgety to harvest.

Someone on Harstine Island in 2018 was selling these beauties at our annual plant sale. I gave one plant to a friend, planted two myself, then gave cuttings to fellow vegetal enthusiasts.

Vegetative propagation is one of the most satisfying ways of multiplying your plants. I've practiced it on tomatoes, yacón, tree collards, Himalayan honeysuckle and more. In a permaculture design, propagating by rooted cuttings or other methods of division keeps your perennials fresh without starting all over again from seed.

Tree collards, for example, gradually deplete calcium from surrounding soil and die within five years, so it's a good idea to keep a replacement regime in parallel development.

Rooting cuttings is an art unto itself. Some require special conditions to take, like seaberry, which demands several months' chilling. Generally, you will be rooting cuttings in media (e.g., mixture of perlite and peat, or seed-starting soil of similarly light blandness) or water.

Two years ago, I was surprised to find that lower tomato branches took root in willow water, and nearly caught up to the seed tomatoes from which they'd been cut.

Willow water is a helpful brew to encourage root development. The hormone auxin, also present in seaweed, stimulates plant tissues to develop roots. Simply steeping some new-growth willow branches in hot water and letting them sit for hours was enough to invigorate my tomato branches, and next time I'll try the same thing with Himalayan honeysuckle.

I had dipped several Himalayan honeysuckle cuttings in rooting gel, which is compounded from various rooting hormones, including auxin, and then I planted them in potting soil. In bringing them to a friend, I braked and dumped the lot in the footwell. She rinsed them off and put them in water.

A couple of weeks later some were rooting, and she reports that one rooting stalk is trying to set fruit on the immature flower that I'd left intact for decoration.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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