

The HPS Horticultural Advisory Service

More questions & answers from the HPS Advisory Service

Pots, pots, and more pots...

From A:

I would like suggestions about what to do with plastic plant pots I no longer need. I don't want to put them into landfill.

To A:

You've asked a question that many amateur gardeners and those working professionally in horticulture are constantly scratching their heads over.

It's very difficult to recycle plastic pots in any quantity. There are organisations that will collect and recycle for you, but only on an industrial scale; I understand they'll collect a minimum of one pallet load, and that all the pots must be exactly the same size! Even a medium-sized nursery would struggle with that.

So, my suggestions are:

1. First, contact your local HPS Group – if you're not already

a member you can find details on the Society's website.

Many members require pots, not only for the HPS plant sales but to propagate plants for other charitable causes as well. If you contact one of the committee it may be possible to put an article in the newsletter offering your pots and/or find out how other members recycle theirs.

2. Some garden centres and nurseries have an area set aside where people can leave unwanted pots, or if they need pots they can help themselves; sometime a charitable donation is requested.

3. Community organisations such as schools, day centres and hospices sometimes ask for pots. It would be worth asking around locally.

4. Your local allotments may have a communal shed where

people share pots, seed trays, etc. 5. Talk to your local gardening society. They may be able to help you lobby your local council about recycling plastic pots. Of course, you may already be a member but, if not, I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't encourage you to join. Horticultural societies, like HPS groups, are invaluable, and full of knowledgeable people.

6. I find that if I sort my pots out I can store a large number, and that usually they're all used during the busy propagation season. Incidentally, I just brush them out before use – a practice approved by Peter Thompson in his highly recommended *Creative Propagation*.

Good luck, and I hope these suggestions help you reduce your pot mountain!



©Elizabeth Gammon

Birch Close, Arundel, Sussex, opened to celebrate our 60th anniversary – gardener Elizabeth Gammon

Hormone Rooting Powder From B:

I help run the allotment shop. I've made sure that we have got rid of the last of the hormone rooting powder now that its active hormonal ingredients have been discontinued.

I learnt at college that the hormones in rooting powder encourage cuttings to produce roots by the action of the hormones on the plant cells. Replacement products describe themselves as 'natural' but do not state what is actually in them. One product vaguely talks about seaweed extract and all say they contain no harmful ingredients. If, as I suspect, there is no active magic ingredient in these new formulations, is it worth using them at all? I am anxious not to restock the allotment shop with something which is essentially useless.

To B:

Thank you for your question. Allotment shops are a valuable resource both for making available useful products and proffering timely advice.

Hormone rooting products can facilitate rooting where cultural practices are not ideal. Most of the plant species we propagate root relatively easily, but the process can be hastened by treating with root hormone. These products may also help with the more challenging species too.

The hormone Auxin occurs naturally in plants as IAA (Indole acetic acid) where it serves to promote the initiation of adventitious roots, which is what we, as propagators, are after. Synthetic forms of Auxin are available commercially in the form of IBA (Indolebutyric acid) and, previously, NAA (Naphthaleneacetic acid). However, the approval of rooting compounds containing NAA ended on 30/06/17 so you are quite correct in using up your old stock.

In order to answer your question accurately I consulted the RHS, who informed me that the only IBA based product now available is 'Clonex' which is a Hormone

Rooting Gel. The RHS directed me to these websites:

- www.growthtechnology.com/product/clonex/
- www.growthtechnology.com/stockists/

It's always advisable to use a small portion of the hormone mixture in a separate container, away from the stock batch. Gels have the advantage over powders of being highly uniform, consistent and easy to use. However, the risk of disease contamination is higher with liquid formulations. These formulations also tend to increase in auxin concentration as the solution evaporates, so it is important to change the solution periodically throughout the day, to keep containers tightly sealed when not in use, and to discard any unused solution at the end of the propagation session rather than putting it back into the stock container. Please note that over application can cause significant damage to the base of the cutting.



© Jill & Stephen Owen

Church Street, Ruyton XI Towns, Shropshire – gardeners Jill & Stephen Owen



© Mike & Jenny Spiller

Elworthy Cottage, Taunton, Somerset – gardeners Mike & Jenny Spiller

During my research into this topic I found many organic homemade rooting recipes, the most interesting a tea made from the bark of the willow tree. This bark contains the herbal extract Salicylic acid, which is the substance that aspirin is derived from. As the drug aspirin represents one of humankind's oldest pharmaceutical agents there may be a case for its healing properties to apply as equally to plants as to humans. Honey is often used too – another traditional regenerative product.

The most bizarre organic hormone-rooting ingredient I came across was Bat Guano. Traditionally used as a fungicide, it is said to nourish both the soil and plants. Easy to make once you have collected enough bat dung from only fruit and insect-feeding species...

Cleaning seed

From C:

I've been collecting Sweet William seeds and find that they're mixed with lots of chaff. Do you know where I could buy some sieves of varying sizes to help clean the seed? I'm sure I saw some being used at the seed bank at Wakehurst Place. A Google search didn't reveal anything helpful, just lots of sieves for bonsai growers.

I think I would collect more for the HPS Seed Exchange if I were able to clean it more quickly.

To C:

First, thank you very much for collecting seed for the Seed Exchange – it's such a valuable resource for members and organisations.

There are many ways of cleaning seed and using sieves is indeed one of them. When I worked at Wakehurst Place, the sieves used for the

Millennium Seedbank came from laboratory suppliers. I found some by putting "Seed Cleaning Brass Sieves" into my internet search engine. I looked at 'images' first, then went to the relevant supplier from there.

At the Chelsea Physic Garden, dedicated volunteers go in every week specifically to clean seed. The sieves they use are very old and very beautiful. I also remember their putting seed into a large enamel bowl and blowing the surface very gently, so that the chaff floated away. This was done outside on a still day; there's definitely a knack to it, so it may be worth practising on seed you have large amounts of first! Any large shallow vessel will do.

I hope this will encourage you to collect more seed. if you would like to delve further into the subject, the Millennium Seed Bank runs courses about seed collection and storage. 🌱

©Clare & Richard Rhys Davies



The Retreat, Penally, Pembrokeshire – gardeners Clare & Richard Rhys Davies

Email your question to: advisory@hardy-plant.org.uk