

# Live stakes: How to expand shrubbery

BWSR  
Conservation  
Technician  
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shares tips for  
propagating  
shrubs

Planting live stakes — cuttings from dormant shrubs — is one way to save money and increase pollinator habitat in your yard. It is best done in March or early April.

Certain shrubs such as willows and dogwoods are easy to propagate in this way. The following tutorial, meant for gardeners with existing shrubs or with neighbors and friends willing to share cuttings, features red osier dogwood (*Cornus sericea*), which is native to Minnesota.

**Benefits of dogwoods:**  
Dogwoods provide habitat for wildlife including pollinators and birds. Their spring blooms offer early floral resources to bees and other pollinators. Dogwoods are best planted in low areas with semi-moist soils, along the edges of swales, wetlands or stormwater ponds, or along shorelines or rain gardens. Branches are red in winter and spring; they turn green during the growing season.



**Clockwise from top left:** Dogwood branch cuttings soak in a 5-gallon bucket. Dogwood live stakes should be planted about 1 foot deep with soil packed firmly around the base of the cutting to secure it. A propagated dogwood live stake is shown in a garden setting. Dogwoods are shown at mature height and width. Dogwoods and similar shrubs can be used to add structure to your yard or act as “living fences.”

**Photo Credits:** Tara Perriello, BWSR



The techniques outlined in this live stakes tutorial can be applied to other shrub species such as (from left) Bebb's willow, pagoda dogwood and silky dogwood. **Photo Credits:** BWSR

Dogwoods' adventitious roots — roots that form from any non-root tissue — allow branches to start growing as soon as they're planted. Mature shrubs' red branches may be used to adorn outdoor pots, window boxes or wreaths.

**Consider layout:** Think about your garden layout and decide how many new shrubs you'd like to add. A good rule of thumb is to space shrubs at least 5 feet apart if you want them to form a hedge. Dogwoods can grow 8 feet tall and 10 feet wide; plan accordingly. It's OK for your shrubs to share some space, but they shouldn't be too crowded. One exception: Live cuttings used in a shoreline restoration may be planted closer together.

**Cut branches:** Cut segments of last year's branches from existing shrubs in March or April, choosing thin, straight branches.

**Start roots:** Begin root development. Pour about 5 inches of water into a 5-gallon bucket, add the cuttings and set it near a window with indirect light.

Alternatively, skip to the "break ground" section to plant cuttings directly in the ground.

**Watch and wait:** Give it time. Allow the cuttings to soak until they develop roots, typically within three weeks. Next, mark the

planting sites with garden stakes.

**Break ground:** Cut into the ground 1 foot deep or the depth of the shovel, then wiggle the shovel back and forth to form a narrow trough. Insert cuttings into the trough and fill it with

the excavated soil, packing the soil firmly to secure the cutting. A good way to make sure cuttings don't tip over is to tamp down the soil with your feet.

**Add mulch:** When the grass surrounding shrubs dies, leave it or add mulch to help retain moisture and reduce weeds. Sedges that tolerate partial shade, such as Pennsylvania sedge (*Carex pensylvanica*), can accomplish the same thing.

**Nurture shrubs:** After spring rains, water about 1 inch per week for the first couple of months, and during stretches of drought. Watering should be unnecessary the following year. Watering might not be an option in shoreline restorations; relying on spring rains is part of the risk that accompanies this free planting and stabilization method.



A closeup of red osier dogwood shows fruit and fall color.

**Photo Credit:** University of Minnesota Extension

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Live stakes will mature within about three years. You will be able to tell the stake is thriving when you see it start to leaf out. If it does not leaf out by the end of May, then you will need to try again next spring.