

## **Propagation by sphagnum**

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The raising of seedlings by means of sphagnum – especially those of the order Ericaceae – is a ready method for seeds which are difficult to raise in the more usual seed mixtures. Its great advantage over other mediums lies in its ability to retain moisture, thus avoiding drying out, which is so disastrous for germinating seeds. There are several species of sphagnum, but I prefer the form which grows on high moors, and is usually of a pink or deep crimson colour. Other forms will serve, but sphagnum gathered from ditches invariably has a slimy growth accompanying it, which can continue to grow in the pots and strangle the seedlings.

Spread the moss in the sun, turning it till thoroughly dry; then rub it through a quarter-inch sieve with the hands (or a stiff brush can be used with advantage). When this is completed you have a medium not unlike

rubbed leaf-mould – fine and springy. I dry this out again, either in a heated greenhouse over pipes, or in a slow oven until it is very dry and crumbly. This is to ensure that the sphagnum is dead, as, if it starts into growth in the pots it will kill the plants. Have ready sufficient, scrupulously clean pots, crocked as for ordinary sowing. Soak the sphagnum in water, squeezing out the surplus, and pack it into pots to within half an inch from the top for fine seeds. Sow the seed very thinly, and label; then spray lightly to settle the seed, but do not cover the seed. The foregoing is suitable for *Rhododendron*, *Phyllodoce*, *Menziesia*, *Shortia*, *Diapensia*, *Cassiope*, etc., and for certain *Primulae* of the *Soldanelloid* section.

Lilies and their near relatives require slightly different treatment. Prepare the pots as before, but only fill them three-quarters full, then sow the seed, and cover with sphagnum to within half an inch from the top.

After-care consists of seeing that the pots never dry out, and in hot weather spray with a mist spray. Pots are best kept in a greenhouse, either cold or heated – naturally in heat the seedlings grow more quickly, but in a cold house they make satisfactory though slower growth. If the seedlings come up quickly, certain species, i.e., *Rhododendron* and *Primula*, benefit from being thinned out at the first leaf stage. Treated thus, they make sturdy seedlings and grow away more easily when pricked out. Ericaceous plants I leave until the following spring before pricking off, but *Primulae* are best done when they have three pairs of leaves. *Liliaceae* I do not prick out, but transfer the pot of seedlings into a ten-inch pot, filled with a suitable compost; the seedling roots can then grow through the ball of sphagnum into the compost.

By the ease of this method of propagation, many interesting and difficult plants may be raised with the minimum of trouble.