



# Cornell University Cooperative Extension



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## The Plant Clinic

### Overview

- Terrific as an easy activity to do with children and youth.
- Tailored for audiences with special needs.

### What you need to know

In the snowy depths of winter, a plant clinic can be the perfect thing for reviving tired houseplants, and winter-weary people as well! Replanting overgrown plants, potting up plantlets from spider plants, and picking off faded leaves and flowers can revive plants and provide a worthwhile activity. Invite staff and friends to bring in overgrown houseplants for the clinic.

Spider plants, aloe, christmas cactus, coleus, piggyback plant, impatiens, and geraniums make good choices. Avoid plants such as cactus that are difficult to handle. Be cautious about plants such as philodendron, poinsettia, or dieffenbachia (dumb cane) which are extremely irritating when eaten; include these only if you are confident that none of the participants will mistakenly eat a leaf. Be sure to include only healthy plants! Look plants over for aphids, mealybugs, white flies and other infestations before they arrive at the clinic.

### Preparation

Before you begin, "advertise" your plant clinic among staff, families, and friends, and encourage them to bring plants in. Ask them to let you know what they plan to bring, so you will know which supplies to have on hand. Cherished plants aren't the best choices, because of possible rough handling. Be sure to remind people to protect the plants en route if the temperature is below freezing. Clearly state where and when you need the plants and let people know that they are welcome to join in the activity; alternately they can leave the plants and pick them up when you're finished.

You may also want to ask if people have pots that they can donate. Many gardeners have more pots than plants, and are often eager to share their supplies, rather than have them go to waste. Cleaning the pots before the clinic can be an additional activity for some participants.

### Materials

- potting soil
- 4" pots for placing plantlets or starts in
- plastic bags to place over newly planted starts; twist ties
- 8" pots for transplanting
- small trays to place under pots
- newspapers to lay on the tables
- spoons (don't give spoons to participants with Alzheimer's or other dementia, because they may unintentionally place a spoonful of soil in their mouths)

## Step by Step

The plant clinic will be messy and very enjoyable. Before you begin, cover the tables with newspaper.

One approach is to have each participant do a solitary activity. Depending on your particular situation, perhaps it will be more enjoyable to work in teams or at stations. For example, one group can repot some plants, while another removes and pots up spider plant plantlets, and a third takes coleus cuttings. After awhile, the groups can switch so they get an opportunity to do all the activities.

An over-the-bed table (the kind used in hospitals) is very handy as a work station for two people sitting opposite (facing) each other. Because the height of the table is adjustable, two people in wheelchairs can work comfortably on the same plant at the same time.

Repotting plants into larger pots requires some degree of manual dexterity. First, have a new, slightly larger pot at hand, and add some soil to the bottom of the pot. While holding the plant firmly at the base, turn the pot upside down, and gently work the plant until you can pull the pot away from the soil. The roots of a "pot-bound" plant will encircle the soil, perhaps to the point where there seem to be more roots than soil.

Next, place the plant in the new container. Fill soil around the spaces between the plant and the container with a spoon. Firm the soil when it reaches the top of the pot. Water thoroughly over a sink. Place on trays when finished.

Starting new plantlets from piggyback plant, spider plant, or strawberries (if you know someone with potted strawberry plants!) is a great plant clinic activity too. To start new plantlets in pots, fill 4" pots with soil mix. Simply pull off plantlets and tuck them into the soil, making sure the soil is firmed to the crown of the plant. Water thoroughly and place a plastic bag over the whole pot after the water has drained. Tie with a twist-tie and leave for a week. After you remove the bags, be sure that the soil remains moist, but not wet. You can take cuttings from easy-to-root plants such as coleus. Insert them into the soil, water, and follow the above procedure.