

Good Growing - Surgery

Debra Korobkin

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“I am a cereus surgeon.”

Cactus and succulent growers find that home surgery is a necessary skill to master. Using kitchen knives and other household items, we can trim plants for cuttings, prune to accommodate space limits, and remove sick, gangrenous tissue.

Columnar, offsetting and jointed plants can be successfully severed, such that both rooted stump and removed arm/offset/pad grow anew. Tall plants that easily tip over are generally good candidates for a little kitchen surgery. Using a large, clean knife whack off a large part of the column. If you need protection from spines, try wrapping the plant in a piece of scrap carpet. This protection works well whether the plant is standing or laid on its side.

Pruning can become necessary when a plant outgrows its living quarters. Surgery is thoughtful pruning. However, be cautious with *Euphorbias* and their milky sap. This liquid is annoying on the skin and a dangerous **irritant** to the eyes. Let *Euphorbia* cuttings drip in a safe place, such as on to newspaper. Keep the kids and pets away until the wounds dry.

For plants that are rotting, home surgery is the treatment of last resort. Checkout the extent of the rot: the greater the rot, the less the chance of saving the plant. Cut the plant at an area that not yet looks rotten. If the internal flesh is orange, sickly yellow or brown, this seemingly healthy flesh is already gangrenous. Remove the sick tissue or amputate as needed. Keep moving up the healthy external growth and amputate if the flesh is discolored and dying. (Be sure to sterilize your knife before each cut.) Sometimes the entire interior of the plant will be dead even though the exterior looks unaffected. Sometimes a single incision will reveal healthy tissue making further surgery unnecessary.

Keep your surgical tools clean during this procedure. Otherwise, you could contaminate the healthy growth just by touching it with a knife used to amputate sick flesh. Dispose of gangrenous growth away from healthy plants.

Keep the wounds clean. Remember that the healthy, severed pieces from many cacti and succulents are clones—genetically identical to the parent. For the healthy cuttings, dip the new wounds into a rooting hormone, such as RootTone, to help the healing process and prepare for eventual planting. Let the wound callus about a week before planting and watering so as not to start the rot cycle all over again.

Using kitchen knives on your plants can be a little scary at first. However, their health and continuing welfare may very well depend on your skills as a botanical surgeon.