

Cloning Your Fruit Trees

Duplicate your best tropical fruit trees this spring by air layering. Air layering is a method of plant propagation used to reproduce a number of tropical fruit trees and shrubs.

Tropical fruit trees that can be air-layered successfully are mamey sapote, carissa, white sapote, star – apple, velvet-apple, tropical apricot, longan, lychee, macadamia, barbados cherry, sapodilla, ambarella, loquat, carambola, persian limes and figs.

Air-layering is a method of producing a new plant that is identical to the parent plant in all respects, like fruit taste, color and size. The new plant is formed while still attached to the parent plant upon which it depends for water and nutrients until roots develop. In this type of propagation a large plant can be developed in a relatively short period of time and with less trouble than other methods of propagation.

Air-layering outdoor is performed best during spring and summer, although, it can be done during any season of the year. Spring and summer layers are usually rooted and ready for transplanting in the fall or winter.

Healthy, maturing branches that are growing vigorously and have been exposed to sunlight should be chosen for air-layering, these usually have more food reserves and therefore root faster. Branches from pencil size to about ¾ inch in diameter are best. The air-layer is usually made at least 12 to 15 inches below the branch tip. The first step is to remove the leaves and twigs on the selected branch for 3 to 4 inches above and below the point where the layer is to be made. The branch is wounded to induce rooting.

Air layering consists of removing a one-half inch to one inch ring of bark with a knife, scraping off the bark within the ring. Enclose the wounded area in a ball of moist sphagnum moss as soon as possible after cutting to prevent drying out. All excessive moisture should be squeezed out of the ball of moss before placing it completely around the stem at the wound. Wrap the sphagnum ball with clear polyethylene film and tie securely with strong rubber bands, grafting tape, or electrical tape, above and below the ball to prevent the moss from drying out. The ball should then be covered with aluminum foil to prevent excessive heat buildup under the plastic.

When a mass of roots are visible through the plastic (check under foil biweekly), the air-layer is ready for removal. This root development may take one month to a year depending upon the variety of plant and the time of year. The air-layer can then be severed from the parent plant just below the ball of moss and roots. The plastic film and tape must be removed prior to planting, do not disturb the moss and roots. The new air-layer or new plant is then ready for potting into a container. Place the newly potted plant in a shady humid location. After further root development in the container, the plant can then be planted into the home landscape. For information on propagation of tropical fruit trees contact the Palm Beach County Cooperative Extension Service Master Gardener volunteers at 233-1750 M-F 9-4. See air layer lychee photo below...

