

GROWERTALKS

Inside Look

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The Magic of Propagation

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One of my best friends lives on 4.5 acres near the Wisconsin-Illinois border. It's a little over an hour drive for us, so we try and visit her and her family whenever all of our schedules jive, especially during the summer. They have an in-ground pool and a pontoon boat since they live right on the Rock River. Their 5,500 sq. ft. house allows plenty of room for my family and my other bestie's family to crash. It's almost like a summer lake house, but they live there all year round.

Anyway, we're always there with our children in tow and they're old enough to hang by themselves while we adults chat over adult beverages. Once in a while, the children (who range in age from 9 to 16) feel like hanging out with us older folks, so they'll wander over and sit for a bit.

My friend's 13-year-old son is particularly amusing because he's the king of the icebreaker topic. Inevitably, whenever the children walk by, the adult conversation stops because the topics are usually of a sensitive nature, so when the children sit down, there's silence. This is when William asks a question like, "Would you rather die in a fire or by drowning?" Or "Which superheroes are better—Marvel or DC?" Or "Would you rather have no legs or no arms?" At first, you wonder which left field these questions came from, but then you find yourself really pondering them seriously. William's icebreaker questions are always real thinkers.

This past summer, he asked, "If you could choose one super power, what would it be?" The answers ran the gamut, but if memory serves, I think I chose the ability to do magic. Which isn't technically a super power, per se, but imagine what you could do if you had magical powers! With the flick of a wrist or the point of a finger, I could clean my whole house in minutes! I could have dinner ready—and cleaned up—as I sit and watch TV! I could have my hair look like it was done in a salon every day! I could make the guy who cut me off in traffic experience horrible gastrointestinal issues ... right at that moment! (Okay, perhaps I don't deserve to have magical powers, which really shouldn't be used to exact revenge.)

If you had magical powers, wouldn't it be great if you could just wave a wand over the greenhouse and everything was grown and finished to perfection? No transplanting, no insects, no diseases, no need to water. Alas, students of Hog-warts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry we are not; we have to do things the old-fashioned way.

But this doesn't mean there isn't some sort of magical element to propagation. I'm still always amazed at how small

little seedlings and liners turn into big, beautiful plants. All of the magic happens in between that time, and it's magic that you and your team do without the need for wands or pixie dust.

Keeping the magic alive has been much harder lately. With labor shortages and raising input costs, making magic in the greenhouse is getting expensive and stressful. More and more growers are turning to other ways to try and make up for the labor gaps while keeping up with the crazy demand we've seen since the pandemic started. One of these is automation. During the last few years, we've seen innovative liner transplanters introduced, and they just keep getting cooler and fancier as more growers bring them into their operations. Bossman Beytes asked a handful of growers and manufacturers for the latest on automated rooting technology.

Unfortunately, seed isn't like Jack's magic beans; otherwise, you wouldn't have to worry about properly handling and storing them. Jerry Gorchels gives us tips to keep good seed from going bad.

If you maintain strict protocols for propagating your cuttings before the boxes even arrive, you'll be ahead of the game. You can also prevent disease during propagation by being vigilant and get tips for producing high-quality young plants when it comes to fertilizer, pH and water management.

So if you could choose one super power, what would it be? Would it be magical powers or would it be the ability to stop time to get in one last turn? Or super speed to get from one end of the greenhouse to the other in less than five seconds?

Or how about this: you could get all the good labor you need with the snap of your fingers. If you could capture that magic in a bottle, imagine what you could sell it for ... **GT**