

STAKING:

The Art of the Invisible

Keeping your plants on their feet and looking good all season. Wayne Winterrowd

“YOU’D NEVER GET ME TO DO THAT!” my chance companion on a garden tour announced. “I prefer a tumble of romantic exuberance.” We were standing before a perennial border famous for its capacity to remain trim and beautiful throughout the growing season. Now, in mid-May, however, it was little more than a dense thicket of brown twigs, overtopping the newly emerged shoots of perennial plants. But as my companion marched off to check out the bluebell wood, I lingered. For to me, that border, so consummately staked, was itself very beautiful, in the way that any garden labor, when perfectly done, always is.

All of the brushwork exemplified the traditional and most effective method of staking. It is accomplished with twiggy brush, sometimes called “**pea staking**” from its use in supporting the pea vines of old-fashioned vegetable gardens. It is a material not to be found at the garden center in tidy bundles, not even for ready money. The best source for it is probably one’s own garden, in carefully accumulated prunings of deciduous shrubs and trees, though one can also find nice bits on winter walks through the woods, or even along the roadside, where maintenance crews sometimes leave tantalizing piles, waiting for the chipper. But whatever its source, twiggy brush will range in length from sturdy branches six or so feet in length

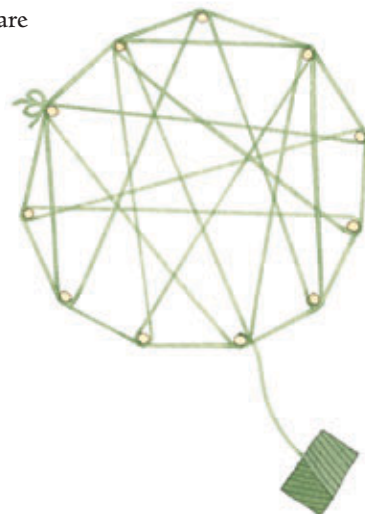


down to trimmings hardly a foot long. However, all will have certain characteristics in common. Each will possess a strong, flexible stem that fans out at the top into smaller branches or twigs, rather like a forearm and the outstretched fingers of a hand. That is the ideal, though strong branches of five feet or more in length and ending in a Y must never be passed over, for they may be perfect supports for the bending branch of a lilac, a mock orange, or an old shrub rose.

Serious gardeners probably never meet with a piece of twiggy brush they cannot use, though there is an ideal, even for brush. Just as with the human body, strength, flexibility, and elasticity comprise that ideal, and it is probably best represented by trimmings from hazelnuts (*Corylus avellana*), which are capable of replacing their harvested top growth with amazing vigor.

Above: Weave together pea brush twigging tightly. Break stems at desired height and bend into the center. A belt of twine is optional. Below: A cat’s cradle with bamboo canes and twine gently supports interior stems.

Pea Brush Practicum Keep lots of pea brush on hand; you’ll need all shapes and sizes. ■ Insert stakes sooner than later; you can always pull them out if they prove unnecessary. ■ Stake should be inserted so that $\frac{1}{4}$ of the branch is belowground and $\frac{3}{4}$ is above. ■ Pea stake should be about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the final height of plant. ■ Heavy plants can be held up by lacing pea brush together with cobbler’s twine.

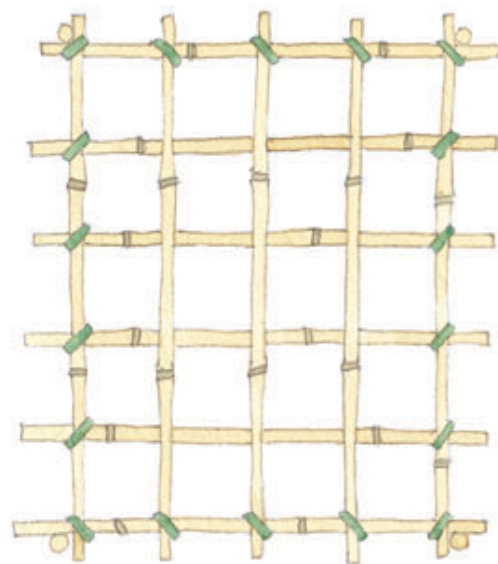


When to Harvest Pea Stakes

Pruning for all species is best done from late winter to very early spring, or before the sap starts to rise. (You lose too much vital fluid if you prune when the sap is rising.) So, from late January to early March in USDA Zones 4-7, earlier farther south. Of course, willows and dogwoods that are valued for their brilliantly colored twigs would be the last to prune, simply because they are still being enjoyed in winter.

Failing a plantation of hazel, suckers and twigs of American beech (*Fagus sylvatica*) are also excellent sources of twiggy brush, as are the branches of almost any maple, backyard fruit tree, or shrub. Willows and shrubby species of dogwood are also desirable, and both will resprout vigorously when cut early each spring to within a foot or so of the earth. The process, called **stooling**, also produces the vividly colored stems in winter for which many of these species are prized. That is a plus, justifying a plantation of them at the edges of a garden.

One must be sure, however, that their twigs are quite dead when inserted into the ground, for both willows and shrubby dogwoods root with incredible ease. So, if not properly cured, a corset of them inserted around a hardy geranium or border aster may startlingly sprout its own assertive growth, leaving one with an unintended effect. Generally, twigs of willows or shrubby dogwoods will give up their incredible propensity to take root a month or so after they have been severed from the parent plant, after which time they will also lose their vivid coloration, fading to brown. Then they may also become quite brittle, as indeed will many twigs accumulated for staking, if they have been stored under cover. The best solution is to store all of them outdoors, in tidy bundles behind the garage or in some other out-of-the-way place, where late winter and spring rains will keep them supple. But one may also use a trick of basket makers, soaking the brush for two



A frame of bamboo canes can be erected over clumps of heavy perennials like helianthus.

or three days in a large bucket or tub before it is needed, which ensures that the pieces will be pliable.

It is a cardinal rule of staking that the supports must be put in place well before they are needed. In that way, the emerging growth of plants will assume a natural shape, scrambling through and above the twiggy brush, and eventually obliterating it, avoiding the look one too often sees in staking, of a poor sailor lashed to the mast for his mutinous transgressions. There are exceptions, to be sure, chief among which are the single stems of lilies and the splendid spires of delphiniums, both of which will require a tall stake inserted next to each flowering stem when it is about half grown. Bamboo poles are best for that, and in the case of delphiniums, they must be really tall, eight feet or more, two feet of which is inserted into the ground for stability. Unlike twiggy brush, which will ideally be mostly hidden by the time a perennial border comes into its first flush of bloom in June, there is no way to conceal these poles, which must be admitted for what they are, and therefore put in as neatly as possible.

Most American perennial borders waken some time between early April and the beginning of May, and it is then that staking should be put in place, just as the tufts of perennial plants display their first vigor and the spring tulips and daffodils are fading.

Only experience will tell which plants are likely to flop, but nothing is lost by applying stakes to all questionable plants, for if the staking is unnecessary, it can be yanked out later. Stakes should be inserted in a sort of corset around the crowns of emerging perennials.

Each stake should be pushed far enough into the ground that it resists a gentle tug or wiggle. In heavy or dry soils, a thorough soaking the night before will help loosen the ground, and in very gravelly soils, there is nothing for it but to excavate holes with a trowel, back-filling them around the stakes and treading firmly. Brush should be inserted with its palm of twiggy fingers facing inward, creating a sort of dome or cage through which the emerging perennial will grow. Generally, a good rule of thumb is to create a cage of stakes about two-thirds the height and width of the fully-grown plant, so that stems and flowers will poke out above, concealing the supporting structure. If, however, one has underestimated the growth a plant may make, another, larger cage might be constructed later, in a ring around the first one, before the growth of the plant flops outward or upon its neighbors. And if one has overestimated the need, protruding twigs may be clipped away when the perennial begins to flower.

Ideally, staking of twiggy brush, artfully inserted, will be enough to hold even the heaviest perennial upright. But stability must sometimes be provided by the use of twine. Every gardener has his favorite, whether hemp or sisal or raffia, all of which are organic and attractive, but also visible in the end results, making clear that the gardener has been busy. Stakes and wayward growths can also be tied in by one of the most sublime materials ever offered to gardeners, though it was not originally meant for their use. **Cobbler's filament**, in dark brown or black, can be tied around and among the twigs, both to provide added support for developing shoots and also to stabilize the cage itself. It can be bought from old-fashioned shoe repair shops, or from businesses specializing in leather tailoring goods, and one spool, of thousands of feet, will last a gardener's lifetime. The filament is composed of a soft twist of fibers that will not cut tender stems, as fishing line does, and it does not glint in the sun. The best grade is marketed as "40-pound

test," which theoretically means that a single strand will support up to 40 pounds, certainly more than any rain-drenched clump of geraniums or asters. There is no rule for winding it around and through twiggy, cat's-cradle fashion, though there is an art to tying it off, for it is invisible except to the keenest eye, and so knots must be made more by feel than by sight. But one gets the hang of it quickly enough, and then the two most important elements of tactful staking—twiggy brush and nylon filament—are in place. When the stakes are natural brush, and the twine that adds support to them is virtually a "no see it," even freshly inserted supports convey the skill of old-fashioned cottage gardeners, always ready to make practical use of what was closest to hand. No expensive hoops or linking frames, in zinc-washed metal or shiny, bright green plastic laminate, which are besides so difficult to wiggle in place, and so much more difficult to store, can match that effect. And besides, it is cheaper. ♡



When tying a single stem to a stake, wrap the twine once around the stake, then out to the plant, make a loop around the plant stem, and take the twine back to the stake to tie off.



Alternative Staking: Pros and Cons

Y stakes: sturdy, minimal plant damage, but can get rusty and cannot be customized to correct height, expensive.

Bamboo: sturdy, good for single stems and cat's cradle arrangements, but more visible than thinner metal wands.

Linking stakes: good for groups of plants, but not as sturdy as bamboo, more likely to warp, and don't lend themselves to cat's cradle webbing. Will rust over time.