

LITHODORAS

TERRY HATCH

Joy Plants

RD #2, Pukekohe East

Lithodoras are hardy sub-shrubs, from southern and western Europe and Morocco. The finest of all the species is *Lithodora diffusa* (*Lithospermum diffusum*), one of the most brilliant and widely grown of the genus. It is of a wirey sub-shrubby habit, a strong, rapid trailer, covering itself in early summer with heads of intense, pure, deep blue flowers.

The two cultivars grown in New Zealand and many other parts of the world are Heavenly Blue and Grace Ward. However, sometimes they are hard to propagate in any numbers and to form into well-grown bushy plants.

I have been growing these plants for many years, trying to find an easy way to mass-produce this spectacular rock plant and, like many others who have tried before, never managing to get a good strike. The cuttings often rot when under mist or only send out few thin roots with bottom heat. Semi-hardwood cuttings have never made such progress so I tried very small, soft tips. These seemed to be the best although not all of them rooted.

I evolved a method of growing stock plants in large bags then putting them under a nova roof house after the first flush of flowers finished. I trim back all flowering shoots and give a light feeding of urea to promote very soft growth. When the plants have made 3 cm. of growth the cuttings are taken and the three bottom leaves removed, then the cuttings are dipped in No. 1 rooting powder and stuck into trays of pumice, given a good watering, placed in the nova house and covered with clear plastic — no bottom heat.

They are watered after about 3 to 4 days and by 10 days many cuttings have rooted. As soon as the whole tray of cuttings has rooted, in 14 to 20 days, they are put outside to harden off before potting in a bark-pumice mix. I try to put them outside on a dull or rainy day. Most years I get 100 percent strike, with later batches giving 85 to 90 percent as the weather gets cooler and the cuttings become firmer.

Growing them this way produces very strong roots. The potted plants are put outside to grow on over winter, although our first batch is often sold in the autumn without flowers.