



Growing and Propagating Crotons for your Outdoor Keys Garden



Colorful, low-maintenance crotons will make your garden sing with color. They do best in fertile, well-drained, moist soil, but can grow in almost any soil type. Once established they are quite drought tolerant and moderately salt tolerant.

Water them when the top inch of soil dries out, and reduce watering in the winter. If they are too wet or too dry for too long, they will tend to drop leaves, resulting in a sparse, leggy-looking plant. Crotons are tropical plants and love our humidity. A good spray of water on the leaves now and then will revive them and help keep insect problems at bay, though they are not typically bothered by more than the usual culprits (mealybugs, spider mites, and scale). Locals say deer and iguanas won't usually bother crotons, but if they get hungry/thirsty enough, all bets are off! Keep in mind croton sap can be irritating to some individuals, and will permanently stain your clothing.

To encourage those wonderful colors, keep in mind that higher light produces more intense leaf color and a more compact plant, while too little light will result in more green leaves. Outdoors in the Keys, crotons generally thrive in partial shade. Some will be healthy and colorful with only 2-4 hours of weaker eastern or very late afternoon sun (<https://peterscrotonnursery.com/shade-crotons>), while others can take more sun (<https://peterscrotonnursery.com/sun-crotons>), but ALL crotons need at least some break from our intense sunlight.

To keep them from getting leggy, a hard prune in the early spring will stimulate branching and new growth. Pinching back during the season will also help keep them bushy and growing. They love palm fertilizer if you are planning to fertilize them at all, but don't over-fertilize. Some varieties such as Mammy naturally twist, but if your croton isn't one of those, finding twisted leaves on it is a sign of over-fertilization. This is most common during the summer months when your plant shouldn't be fertilized as much. Stick with a few feedings in the spring (one early, one late), and refrain from feeding throughout the rest of the year.

If you need to fill a garden, consider some of these local favorites that are a bit larger- and faster-growing: (L to R below) Stoptlight, Franklin Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt (aka Sloppy Painter), Mango, and Oak Leaf. The last picture is Mammy, another tough croton favorite, though it tends to stay shorter and grow a bit more slowly.



There are two basic ways to propagate crotons: stem-cuttings and air-layering (seeds don't work as well). We have been using the stem-cutting method at the Garden Club. While there are many ways to do it, our very own "Croton Queen," member Patti Rodriguez' method brings in a large number of nice-looking plants for Propagation to sell. She recently spent a Monday morning Propagation session with some of us. We will share what we learned from her method.



Fill the 1-gallon pot to the top with potting soil. Use brown-wood cuttings around 18 inches in length, with the stem strong enough to hold up the plant (pencil thick to a half-inch). Make a fresh cut at a 45-degree angle. Patti says she usually selects single stems and takes cuttings when routinely pruning. She will place 3 cuttings in each pot.



Next, gently scrape the bark for 3-4 inches, exposing the cambium. Cambium is the tissue just beneath the bark that is the "lifeline" for nutrient movement within the plant. Scraping it generates a healing callous from which new root growth will take place. Wet the cutting and dip it into rooting hormone.



Poke 3 holes in the soil for each pot. Plant each cutting securely, and stake to keep it upright and to keep the leaves from lying in the soil (she uses chopsticks). Patti doesn't remove many leaves, finding that the plant will drop any leaves it cannot support.



Keep the pots in bright but indirect light--you don't want the sun to wilt them. For at least the first 2 weeks, keep the plants very wet, kind of replicating how they would root in a vase. You can tell when they have rooted when there is new growth. Patti uses this same method for any plant with a firm stem.

We love Patti's method since it results in viable potted plants quickly, but since there are so many propagation methods, we also offer up another method as well. Here is the University of Florida method for crotons:

To propagate a croton plant, use a stem cutting that is 3-4 inches long and has 3 to 5 leaves. Dip the cut end of the cutting in an off-the-shelf rooting hormone and plant in a small pot. Keep the soil moist, but not overwatered. Cuttings will root in less than a month if temperatures stay between 70°-80°F. Transplant your new croton plant when a new root system has been established and there is noticeable new growth. New foliage will begin green and will develop color with maturity.

<https://gardeningolutions.ifas.ufl.edu/plants/ornamentals/croton.html#:~:text=To%20propagate%20a%20croton%20plant,70%C2%B0%2D80%C2%B0F.>