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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Tuesday, Sept. 22, 1931.

(NOT FOR PUBLICATION)

Subject: "Looking After the House Plants." Information from W.R. Beattie,
Bureau of Plant Industry, U.S.D.A.

Publications available: Mimeographed circular, "Care of House Plants."

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"Just one more day and another September will be gone," I said.

W.R.B., the Garden Advisor, looked around. He was sifting a wheelbarrow load of soil.

"Hello, Aunt Sammy. What can I do for you today?"

"Answer a question or two, if you please, sir. I came out here for the sole purpose of seeing you and asking some questions. And I walked out, too-- clear from home because it was such a pleasant quiet fall day. It makes me think of some poetry I once learned in school --

"Through the open door
A Drowsy smell of flowers--grey heliotrope,
And white sweet clover, and shy mignonette--
Comes faintly in, and silent chorus lends
To the pervading symphony of peace."

"Very nice, I'm sure," said the Garden Advisor. "But we gardeners mustn't go to sleep in this drowsy fall weather or one of these times Jack Frost will sneak up and catch us unaware. Then it may be too late to save some of the plants we would like to take into the house for the winter."

"I'm so glad you mentioned that. You see, that's one question I wanted to ask you. How do you go about saving plants from being killed by frost?"

"About this time of year," said W.R.B., "I look over my garden and plan to save the most important plants and take care of them. Right over there on the shelf in my garage I keep some large sheets of very heavy paper. Whenever I suspect that the frost is likely to be nipping my choicest plants, I spread this paper over them at night, hoping to have just a few more blooms in my garden."

"What about geraniums?" I asked. Will you dig up all your geraniums, put them in pots, and keep them in the house?"

"No, indeed," replied W.R.B. "When I think there is danger of the geranium plants being killed, I simply take a number of cuttings, and root them in the sand for next years' plants. I use a box about 5 inches deep, or a large earthenware fern pan. I place about two inches of rich sandy soil in the bottom of it, then fill it--nearly to the top--with clean, sharp sand. I make the sand firm with a small block of wood, and then make holes in it to insert the cuttings."

"How large do you make geranium cuttings?"

"Oh, about four inches long. I simply cut off some of the most vigorous branches of the geraniums making a clean cut with a sharp knife. From this cutting I remove two or three of the lower leaves, and slightly trim back the remaining leaves so as to reduce the moisture evaporation from the cutting. I frequently allow the cuttings to lie spread out for an hour or two, until the cut portions become dry, but not long enough for the cutting itself, or its leaves, to wilt. Then with a small round stick, I make holes in the sand two or three inches apart, insert the cuttings, and pack the sand firmly about them. The cuttings should be just deep enough so that they will not quite reach the layer of soil beneath the layer of sand. But I make sure that each cutting is pushed down firmly to the bottom of the hole."

My next question was about plants kept on the porch or indoors during the summer months, and whether they should have any special attention before they go into a house permanently for the winter.

"All house plants kept out on the porch or inside during the summer need to be taken into the yard some fine fall day for a thorough overhauling before the winter season sets in. First, take off any dead leaves and then go over the leaves left on to see that they are free from red spider mite, mealey bugs, scale insects and any other pests. A palm plant will need to be carefully sponged and rinsed. If any of the plants need re-potting now is the time to do it."

"What about my ferns? Do they need any special care?"

"If they have any damaged fronds," explained my friend, "these should be removed with a slender-bladed knife. Cut them near the base of the plant. Ferns are generally divided and repotted in the spring, it is not necessary to disturb their roots in the fall of the year. However, it is a good plan to remove a little of the top soil from the fern pans, and replace it with some rich composted soil. This gives the plants new soil to draw upon during the winter. Sometimes when the plants have made a strong growth during the summer they may become pot-bound and need to be set in slightly larger pots."

"Do the fern pans need any attention?"

"The pans in which the ferns are growing certainly need a good cleaning. Use a wire brush or some steel wool to remove any particles of soil--or anythings else that may stick to the outside of the pans. Spray the ferns with cold water. And see that no insects are lodged on them when you take them into the house. Sometimes a little insect known as mealey bug gets on the under side of

fern leaves. Badly infested leaves should be removed and burned, but those that are only slightly infested can be cleaned by scrubbing the fronds, on the underside, with soapy water. Use fish oil soap instead of ordinary soap. After scrubbing the fronds, spray the plant thoroughly with water. And, by the way, always do this job with the plant lying on its side so that none of the soapy water will drip onto the soil.

"Now suppose there are some large geranium plants in the garden. How about lifting those for winter blooming in the house?" I asked next.

"It can be done, Aunt Sammy, but it is rather difficult, especially if the geranium plants are growing in sandy soil, or in soil that does not cling closely together. With a clay soil it is possible to lift them with a ball of earth around the roots, and place them in pots without disturbing them too much. But a clay soil is not very good for growing geraniums in the house. I think you will get greater satisfaction from some of the begonias as houseplants. They are much easier to transplant and care for. In the fall, after I take what geranium cuttings I want, I dig up the old plants and pack them in a box with their roots in soil. Then I water them, and after a few days set them in a well-lighted place in the cellar. Here they are given a little water--say about twice a month--and are kept in a semi-dormant condition throughout the winter.

The Garden Advisor looked out over his stretch of flower beds. "To tell you the truth, Aunt Sammy," he said, "There are not many flowering plants flourishing in the garden during the summer that are suitable for houseplants in the winter. I prefer, for the most part, to have a separate collection of pot-grown plants for keeping my house cheerful when winter winds blow."

If you have any questions to ask about house plants, please send them to me and I'll take them over to W.R.B.

Tomorrow we'll talk about styles in rompers. Lots of new information for mothers about correct and comfortable clothes for junior at the crawling and creeping age.

