

Good-by Summer: Hello Fall

Would you like to throw down your trowel and retreat to the house, declaring to any chance listener, "Okay weeds, you win!" So, are you considering houseplants? Once upon a time the term houseplant referred to masses of African violets in tiered displays bending their blooms toward the rising sun.

African violets, *Saintpaulia*, are extremely well behaved, staying in their pots without climbing up the draperies although some do have trailing stems with rosettes on the ends. With over 2000 varieties to choose from, you can understand why collectors need 'just one more'. Serious fanciers install grow-lights to provide the light they need during the short days of winter. Other growers wait for spring. A good soil-less potting mix is essential and they should be freshly potted once a year, but not necessarily into a larger pot. The diameter of the pot should be 1/3 the diameter of the plant.

There are all sorts of devices featured in catalogs to prevent over-watering which is death to African violets. I was warned not to get the leaves wet but I have never heard why. A quarter-strength high potash, high phosphate liquid fertilizer can be added at each watering.

Do be sure not to over-water. That precaution is important for most houseplants. If you put the pots on a grid over water, not in it, the humidity is helpful. You can also keep a few vases of water nearby with cuttings in them. Whether the cuttings root or not isn't as important as keeping the air in the room from becoming too dry.

One reason African violets are popular is that they like houses: they tend to perish in greenhouses where it may be too hot in summer and cold in winter. They can be grown from seed or propagated from leaf cuttings and some varieties have plantlets on their flower stalks that may be planted on their own.

Other tropical plants are displacing these small charmers in popularity, perhaps because larger rooms require plants to scale. You do see whole banana trees offered as houseplants, as well as not-so-dwarf citrus. If you wish to brew coffee from your very own tree, those plants are available as *Coffea arabica* with red pulpy berries and fragrant white flowers amid shiny green leaves. It does make you wonder if there are any limits to what can be invited to join the family inside?

For generations Boston ferns graced parlor windows where they filtered light and the curiosity of passers by. Today you can choose from a plethora of ferns, even such varieties as staghorn, *Platycerium*, which is evergreen and epiphytic so can be hung on a board with its creeping rhizomes in sphagnum moss. It can be hung from a tree in summer- very interesting.

Another fascinating fern is hard fern, *Blechnum gibbum*. They are erect with the new growth arising in the center of the plant and the plant's rhizome rising from the pot like a fat tree trunk. They need good air circulation and a potting medium of one part

consisting of a balanced mix of acidic loam, medium grade bark, and charcoal, two parts sharp sand, and three parts coarse leaf mold.

Years ago everyone had angel leaf begonias or other sorts that weathered large dogs and small boys, even a classroom of squirmy scholars prone to prodding the pot with pointed pencils. Begonias are still with us but greatly glamorized. Some have huge crinkly leaves edged in red, others sport silver spots. I ordered the snail begonia 'Escargot' years ago but it was a weak thing, the size of a sprig of parsley and it faded away.

It is apparent that a lot of houseplants are bred to be 'conversation starters' but is that an advantage if the conversation starts with "Good grief, what IS that?"

POSTSCRIPT: I just loved reading about a 94-year old man, Ken Hechler, a former US Rep. and W.Va. Secretary of State, who was arrested for protesting mountain top removal! Bless his heart and he wasn't alone: 29 other citizens of southern West Virginia joined him in being arrested. If this were a perfect world of course it would be the coal company executives who would be arrested for despoiling God's creation.