



Living room corner, left, shows row of geraniums in bright rose and pale pinks, pots of African violets, and a large, red-leaved begonia, Dorothy Grant. In close-up above, pots are set on metal screening stands in copper tray. Water added to the tray provides humidity for the plants.



HOUSE & GARDEN, OCTOBER, 1953

A gallery of plants leads from garage to house. At left are varieties of fragrant-leaved geraniums, begonias, Sprenger asparagus fern. Plants at right include amaryllis on floor, climbing ivy, wax plants, crab cactus, camellias, anthuriums. At far end, oleander in tub.

Diary of a plant detective

Mystery writer Rex Stout

has 475 witnesses

to prove the case for house plants



Author Rex Stout inspects the antics of a spiralling cactus. Below, plants fill decorative corner at entrance to gallery. On window ledge, white pot of haworthia (fifteen years old). Marica, or fan plant, has a single new bloom each day. Row of plants along floor includes an oleander, azaleas.



In a north window of the passageway from my garage to my house is a lace curtain that has been there twenty years and has never been washed. It's an asparagus fern in a six-inch pot with a dozen or so eight-foot stems, and when a stem starts to brown with age I cut it off, and here comes another to take its place. If the window is left open and rain comes in, the curtain, far from being bedraggled, is bespangled. I paid a dime for it in 1933, and the only care it ever got has been water as needed, a little liquid fertilizer now and then, and repotting every three or four years. I figure I owe it around seventy dollars, the amount saved on curtain launderings and replacements, but it never duns me.

Not that I keep books on all my 475 house plants on a dollar-and-cents basis. Some of them would be so far in the red it wouldn't be funny. To keep the three apple-scented geraniums in good shape takes around twenty hours a year, amounting, at \$160 an hour, which is about what I make at my profession of writing stories, to \$3,200 annually. \$38,400 for the twelve years I've had them. They get red spider, white fly, mealy bugs, and dead leaves with tough stems—or at least they constantly try to. But I keep them at strategic spots where I frequently pass, and every time I go by I get a good whiff of their fresh and pungent fragrance. I haven't got down to figuring the cost per whiff, but whatever it is, it's worth it. After years of monkeying with scented-leaved geraniums, and trying more than thirty, the only ones besides apple that I still hang onto are apricot, crispum (lemon), and fragrans (nutmeg). They all smell good even before breakfast, which is my acid test for odors.

I have found that with all house plants strategic placement is half the battle, with reference both to my own enjoyment and the health and happiness of the plants. I have no greenhouse—chiefly because I'm afraid it would keep me from ever getting to my typewriter—but the passage from the garage to the house is glassed on both sides, and big windows are everywhere, with exposures on all sides. I like plants to be part of the family and refuse to keep them where there are few passersby. Since the seven-foot-wide window at the breakfast table faces east, it is reserved for African violets, bi-color maranta, an apple geranium, blue-flowered rosemary, the tall slender begonia Mrs. Kimball, and an assortment of various small plants. A window wall at the end of the room extends around each corner so that it totals 32 feet of glass, south, west and north. The south side is for zonal geraniums, of which Single Pink Bird's Egg, Mrs. Hawley, Daybreak, La Fiesta, Martha Cook, Mrs. Lawrence and Picardy are my favorites. On the west are spotted-leaved and small-leaved

(Continued on page 248)

PLANT DETECTIVE continued from page 187

begonias, particularly *B. foliosa*, one of the loveliest plants ever potted. In between are large, contorted cacti for punctuation. Here and there, for variation, is a bowl of hyacinths or narcissus, a *Hoya carnosa* (wax plant), a tri-color maranta, a coral ardisia, or a scented-leaved geranium.

That 32 feet of window-sill is 16 inches wide, and along its whole length are copper trays 36 inches long, six inches wide, and 1½ inches deep. Each pot sits on a little square stand one inch high, made (there's nothing to it) of quarter-inch mesh hardware cloth. That makes watering a pleasure. The excess water drips into the pans and a tour with a sponge every two or three weeks keeps the pans presentable. The little stands are much better than pebbles for keeping the pots above the excess water, because the pebbles take up a lot of the space (and they get slimy and are an awful mess to clean.)

On the north side of the window are rex begonias. (They're wonderful plants.) Not only are their fantastic, many-colored leaves interesting and attractive, but with the right treatment they bloom for long periods through the winter. Their only drawbacks are that they need a lot of room and there are so many scores of desirable varieties that you have to keep them within bounds. To propagate them cut off a healthy leaf, usually the size of your two hands together, and with a razor blade make a little slit at seven or eight of the vein junctions. Put the leaf flat on moist peat moss or vermiculite

(or even sand if you keep it moist), spike it down with toothpicks, and in a few weeks you have seven or eight new plants.

Some plants such as camellias and orchids never get inside the house because they grow best in the passage from the garage to the house. The temperature in the passage goes down to fifty degrees at night from October to April. Its concrete floor is frequently sprinkled, and the cool moist air is welcomed by camellias, gardenias, azaleas, many begonias, some orchids, passion flowers, all geraniums, citrus plants, and others. By keeping the camellias pretty wet from August 15th to October 15th, the tragedy of bud dropping in March and April is kept to a minimum. I have only fourteen camellia plants, but at the height of their season no one ever goes through the passage without stopping for a look. They are kept at the coolest end, next to the garage, on the north side, and the semi-tropical beauties love it.

In the middle of winter it is a pleasure to enter my house—at least it is for me, and others agree. You drive through snow or sleet or frosty gales, or all three, with outdoor nature gone below and all hatches battened down, into the garage, climb out, shut the garage door, cross to the far corner, to the door to the passage, open it, and enter. The smell of soil and live growing things is so sudden and keen it is almost a physical shock. On either side is a jungle of green—ivies of many
(Continued on page 249)

varieties, maricas, philodendrons, wax plants, ferns—walls of green; and then you see the spots of color. Of course always the abutilons' orangey red; and, according to the season, the fragrant white flowers of the Ponderosa lemon, geraniums, gardenias, begonias, camellias, coral ardisias, others. I admit you will also see the bright 'something' of Christmas cactus. I say 'something' because the blossoms of that popular plant are not in my opinion of a mentionable color. I would like it better if it never bloomed. Why do I have it? Oh, you know, people have things.

Anyhow, I claim it is a happy way of entering a house. It is much more affable than if you have to say after dinner, 'Come on to the greenhouse and let me show you a wonderful specimen of *Pelargonium echinatum*;' and your guests, relaxed in easy chairs with their cognac, say with feigned enthusiasm, 'Sure, we'd love to see it;' and they all reluctantly make the trip.

One of the spots of color catching your eye in the passage in midwinter may be a passion flower, but as I grow those plants, winter blooms are only a by-product. Every May I root six cuttings, pot them, grow them all summer in the shade of an apple tree, move them inside the last of September, give them good culture until May 20th, and then take them from the pots and plant them outdoors in a warm sunny spot by a wall in the court. They bloom all summer right up to frost, when I turn my back and let the frost have them. It would be next to impossible to take up roots enough for them to thrive in a pot again; and anyhow, I already

have my six new plants on the way for next year. Besides, they've had their share of adulation all summer, from the family as well as guests.

I must mention, at least in parentheses, that among the jungle in the passage are big pots of parsley and chives and tarragon. It's a pity that it is a good twenty paces from the kitchen to the passage, but they do much better there.

I don't spend a lot of money on all this indoor horticulture. If I did it would still be a source of lively pleasure, but of a somewhat different kind. I doubt if I've spent more than twenty dollars a year for the past ten years for house plants. I do a fair amount of propagating of various kinds, including starting new plants from seeds. It is simple to build a rooting box, say 18 by 30, with a compartment below for a 25-watt electric bulb for bottom heat. With it, in the course of a year, you can root enough cuttings to start a small nursery.

A few plants will not root, at least not for me. Years ago a friend gave me an infant plant, one little stem with a few leaves, called *Daphne* of Crete. It is now in a five-inch pot and has spread into a recumbent mat of the loveliest gray-green leaves I have ever seen. Many friends have admired and coveted it, and I would like another plant or two for myself, but there is absolutely nothing doing. I have tried over and over, using all known mediums and all degrees of moisture and temperature, at all seasons of the year, with the same invariable result:

(Continued on page 250)

the new

gift sensation

a "must" for every
home owner...a new
gift idea for friends
who have almost
everything!



Custom-tailored,
handsome waterproof
holster gives new protection...
new portability...new convenience
for drilling, sanding, buffing. 1000's of
hobby uses at home, on cars, on boats, etc.,
Give them a fistfull of power!

none. I may as well admit that this is the compelling reason for my writing this piece: possibly someone will write to tell me how to root *Daphne* of Crete.

This paragraph is for people who like oddities. Its hero is a plant called *Ceropegia Woodii*, and if you like fussing with something, 'C.W.' is ideal. It sends out shoots, multitudes of them, from its crown, and each shoot becomes a flexible rubbery stem and goes on growing, lengthening, forever—anyhow, practically forever. All along each stem, spaced frugally but most effectively, are dainty little grayish leaves with dark mottles; and also along each stem are curious little bell-like affairs which 'C.W.' doubtless thinks are flowers. They too are dainty and very attractive close up. If you're lazy or busy for the next three or four years you can merely let the stems go on lengthening and matting, but if you want to fuss it is a superb opportunity. Stick a stiff wire about twenty inches long upright in the middle of the pot,

and on it, extending ten or twelve inches to each side, erect a wire lattice, with uprights every two inches and horizontals every three inches. (These distances are not mandatory; indulge your personality.) Then, as the shoots lengthen, arrange them and train them on the lattice. For the first two or three years it will look a little skimpy, but as the decades flit by and your grandchildren begin to cluster around, you will begin to realize, and so will others, that in 'C.W.' you really have got something. The stems will go on lengthening, the dainty little leaves and curious little bells will multiply, remultiply, and fill all the spaces. The first thing you know you will have a triumphant and completely satisfying answer to the question, 'What did you do when you were young, grandpa?'

As far as that goes, there is hardly a single one of all my 475 house plants that I wouldn't be willing to trot out as a vital part of my answer to that embarrassing question.