

VINTAGE WORDS OF WISDOM

Room & Window Gardening

By

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Frontispiece and cover: A jar of Golden Spur Daffodils. Fibre has been used as growing material.
(Chapter VII and calendar notes for October)



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PUBLISHERS' FOREWORD

Room and Window Gardening is a practical and comprehensive guide for all those who garden indoors and in small spaces. This **Vintage Words of Wisdom** title was originally published in 1937 but it remains remarkably relevant today as living spaces become smaller and more crowded, and outside space is a luxury that many cannot afford or do not have the time to tend.

The author imparts his wide knowledge and experience on the plants that are most suitable for growing indoors and the care that they need. The book also covers window sill gardening with advice on building and stocking window boxes, information on pots and tubs to use in small front and back yards and patios, guidance on propagation and how to buy the plants you need, as well as a month-by-month guide to plant selection and care throughout the year. He also covers things like window cases and Wardian cases, which are experiencing something of a revival in the twenty-first century after being seen as old-fashioned for a long time.

Some aspects of indoor gardening have obviously changed since the early twentieth-century. Central heating in most houses these days is obviously not something that Mr Wright had to deal with, but the consistent warmth provided will be of benefit to many of the plants he recommends and the problem of draughts and frost is far less of a problem today than it was in the 1930s. Smoke from open fires and smog from outside is also no longer a major problem in modern homes and means that plants won't need as much sponging and syringing as they did in Mr Wright's day! However, readers should consult modern sources of information if they have any concerns about the effects of central heating on their plants (for example, humidity is a factor that needs to be considered for plants like ferns in centrally-heated homes with double-glazing).

This useful book also includes Mr Wright's often amusing and engaging personal reflections on indoor gardening. For example, he advises that cold tea should not be supplied either to indoor plants or to himself:

Does the housewife wonder whether a cup of nice hot tea which has stood on the hob for an hour or two would invigorate the plants as much as she believes it to invigorate herself? We do not administer such fluid either to the editorial anatomy or to the editorial bulbs, and must therefore leave it as a subject for experiment by more daring and less dyspeptic spirits.

While some of his attitudes and remarks about class and housing are not to today's taste, and his attachment to aspidistras may be seen as quaint by many, the author is surprisingly modern in some respects, including his views on flower arranging:

We will not assume that skill in the decoration of rooms with flowers is exclusive to either sex, and as in other matters, special ability is often a matter of the individual, whether male or female. We suggest, however, that the tasteful disposal of flowers is a valuable auxiliary to their successful cultivation, and that young people of each sex should be taught both accomplishments.

Overall, the author's enthusiasm for and delight in plants shines through in this helpful guide. The book is illustrated with contemporary photographs, which provide a charming and nostalgic picture of the impressive flower displays achieved by people determined to beautify their surroundings in whatever space they had available.

Mr Wright waxes lyrical on the many graceful and attractive species of ferns that can be grown very successfully indoors. For more information on growing ferns please visit www.wordstothewise.co.uk for details of the **Vintage Words of Wisdom** title *Ferns and Fern Culture* by J. Birkenhead.

VINTAGE WORDS OF WISDOM

The **Vintage Words of Wisdom** titles are not simply facsimiles of old books. They have been carefully selected and professionally produced as high quality ebooks. Our aim is to make the best vintage books on popular topics of interest more widely available again. The books range from practical titles that include wisdom from times past to unashamedly nostalgic works that will appeal to those who may remember these or similar titles from their childhood. Often amusing and quaint, these vintage volumes also contain wise words and advice that may have been forgotten in the intervening years. So often it is worth revisiting the past to remind ourselves that the best ideas stand the test of time. Above all, the **Vintage Words of Wisdom** titles are highly entertaining and provide a fascinating snapshot of life in days gone by. We have chosen books with wonderful illustrations, exciting stories of daring and adventure, practical advice and charming nostalgic descriptions of a simpler life.

Titles include:

Poultry-keeping

Room and Window Gardening

Ferns and Fern Culture

Woodwork Tools and How to Use Them

Home Carpentry: A Practical Guide for the Amateur

The Boys' Book of Aeroplanes

The Railway Age

Sky Roads of the World

Lillie London's Needlework Book

The Cottage Farm Month by Month

For further details and the most up-to-date information on our titles please visit our website www.wordstothewise.co.uk

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

IN these days plants and flowers play prominent parts in all important public functions, and this fact doubtless serves to stimulate the great and ever-increasing tendency displayed by flat-dwellers and householders alike to adorn, not only the interior, but also the exterior, of their dwellings.

It is an admirable impulse, that which moves citizens to combine with their own enjoyment pleasure for the public at large, and such an end is certainly served when the house-fronts of busy towns are decorated with beautiful living objects.

The object in view is open to all classes, and it is gratifying to realize that the tenement-dweller in industrial districts appears to be equally able and willing, with the occupant of the most imposing set of 'mansions', to perform his part.

As one who has striven earnestly throughout a long life to encourage the development of flower-gardening throughout its various phases, I gladly offer the public the present volume, devoted as it is to the task of providing guidance in making rooms, windows, and homes beautiful, not only in themselves, but as components in general schemes for brightening public thoroughfares.

I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to the *South London Press* and the London Gardens Society for the help they have given me in choosing many of the illustrations.

WALTER P. WRIGHT, 1937

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Part I: The Flat Beautiful

CHAPTER I

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

So far as private dwellings are concerned, modern building has proceeded on five broad lines: (1) the construction of new blocks of self-contained suites of rooms commonly known as 'flats', or, when occupied by the working classes, as 'tenements'; (2) the reconstruction of old houses in order to provide such flats or tenements; (3) the erection of new detached 'villa residences', large or small according to circumstances; (4) the assembling, in series, of detached and semi-detached houses to form 'garden cities'; and (5) the construction of 'terrace' houses in long streets which cumulatively form 'building estates'.

Varying conditions naturally prevail:

In (1) we find a condition differing in a greater or less degree from all the others, in that there is no cultivable ground attached to each domicile, although occupants of tenement blocks may have allotment ground some distance from their homes.

In (2) a similar state generally prevails, although in a minority of cases some of the flats share the original garden in specified quantities.

In (3), (4), and (5), gardens, large or small, are the rule rather than the exception.

It is obvious that, with such widely different conditions, gardening must take different forms. The flat-dweller is particularly handicapped, because he lacks certain very desirable auxiliaries, and special problems have arisen for him.

In many instances the old-time householder had a conservatory attached to the dwelling, and, in order to provide material for furnishing it, not in itself being adapted to cultivation but only to display, he provided frames and greenhouses in the garden. Here was a system of gardening that was purely horticultural. With plants were associated flower-pots, with flower-pots soil composts, and with pots and composts a potting-shed. Potting was as much a part of gardening as watering, and both were associated with various methods of propagation, such as sowing seeds, making and striking cuttings, grafting, inarching, layering, dividing, and so forth.

Such gardening still goes on, and indeed tends to spread with the considerable number of small habitations which are constructed yearly, each with its garden, as witness the ever-increasing demand for what are known as amateurs' greenhouses. But with flats, outdoor gardening, with or without frame and greenhouse, has to be discontinued, since the flat has no garden, and consequently gardening has to take other forms.

Cultivation indoors has not ceased, however. For one thing, there has been an immense development in the use of fibre as a substitute for soil; while largely increased supplies of bowls, vases, and other kinds of ornamental ware have come into use, either as feeding-spaces for bulbs, or as receptacles for pot plants and cut flowers.

Persons becoming flat-dwellers who have had to forgo gardens, greenhouses, frames, potting-sheds, and other auxiliaries to flower-growing, may have had grave misgivings at the outset, fearing that, with the removal of facilities for storing flower-pots, mixing composts, providing space for propagation boxes, etc., they would be deprived of gardening joys to a marked degree. They have found, however, that there is much to compensate for the loss of the stock facilities associated with the old style of gardening. This being the case, one regrets to see so many instances of flat-dwellers confining their attention to a few commonplace things, or even to cut flowers alone. How many cases there are in which the flat contains nothing more than an *Aspidistra* and an *Asparagus Fern*, these being bought in pots which stand in saucers of water all the year round in order to avoid the 'mess' of outflowing water!

It is a poor system of indoor gardening which shows itself in nothing better than the care of two or three meagre plants in pots, plant and pot being discarded together when the inevitable decline sets in and a fresh pair bought from the florist. Real gardening in the flat can do better than that: it can bring in, not only a selection of pot

plants, but also bulbs in bowls. In some cases there may be space for plants of various kinds in hanging baskets and in window boxes - all these in addition to cut flowers in ornamental receptacles.

There may be an open-air space, such as a balcony, veranda, or small terrace, as well as a covered landing, in some flats, on which space can be found for plants. There may even be a small landing or terrace over which a glass roof can be erected, for flats vary even in one block of buildings, which externally is no more than a dreary expanse of bricks and mortar. With every such opportunity taken advantage of, there will be fewer of the barrack-like ranges which are now such a desolating eyesore in modern towns.

Flat-gardening even has advantages of its own. Water being the medium through which the vast majority of plants take up the principal part of their food, it is relevant to point out one advantage of a positively vital nature which the flat enjoys in floriculture. Every flat has its abundant supply of water - far more, indeed, than many thousands of country cottages and villas, which tend to suffer severely in periods of drought. The water of the flat may be hard, but it can be softened, for ample appliances are available for the purpose at prices below those of even the cheaper greenhouses.

No plant grown in a flat need suffer from want of water; moreover, additional food can be supplied to plants, as needed, better in the form of powder fertilizers watered-in than in any other way.

It is strange but true that many flat-dwellers restrict their number of pot plants because water escaping from the drainage-hole of a flower-pot tends to 'slop about' or 'make a mess'. Is it, after all, much trouble to take a few plants to a kitchen sink for the watering, which in winter may only be needed once a fortnight, if that? Surely not. These queer folk even go farther than to restrict the number of their plants: they subject the few they do grow to the ordeal of standing in the shallow water of a containing saucer or bowl all the year round, and that is undeniably unfavourable to health.

The flat, then, has one strong factor in successful cultivation always available, and its value cannot be exaggerated. There is another: the plants grown can be kept under the closest possible personal observation whatever the weather may be, and, within limits, whatever the condition of health affecting the grower. They can be moved about from place to place as desired, or as needed to provide suitable sun and shade. They can be used for the living-room, the lounge, the drawing-room, and the dinner table alternately, according to taste or need.

It may be objected that supplies of flowering plants cannot be maintained in a flat all the year round without the aid of a frame or greenhouse, but that cut blooms purchased at frequent intervals and sometimes at high prices must be obtained.

It is indisputable that both frame and greenhouse are valuable adjuncts to gardening in whatever form, as we shall see in a later chapter, and it is further admitted that cut flowers serve an exceedingly useful purpose. But the provision of plants and flowers by purchase alone is not gardening at its best; rather should it be considered supplementary. The use of such bowls, jars, and vases as so often serve as receptacles for plants growing in pots should also be supplementary. Use them by all means, suiting their forms and colours to the furniture, the paint, and the hangings of the room, because of their acknowledged decorative value; but let them harmonize also with the plants which they contain.

We have, then, a practical as well as a merely arguable case for pot plants in the flat, and will pursue it in due course, giving selections of kinds and hints as to treatment. First, however, a few remarks on the advantages of window boxes. It is too often assumed that this branch of cultivation is concerned only with plants that can be turned out of their pots and replanted in fresh soil. Were that the case, window boxes could not be used in numerous large blocks of several floors, because of the underflow of water which would be going on almost incessantly during watering in hot weather. Here would be 'mess' indeed, walls dripping moisture, one tier of boxes receiving frequent douches from others above, and so forth.

Long, narrow boxes suitable for furnishing outside wall space wherever there is a suitable sill, can, however, serve a worthy purpose merely as containers for pot plants. It is not much trouble to provide a window box with a level seating on a sloping sill, as we shall see presently, and thus firmly seated, it provides space for plants with or without pots.

Assuming that pots are used (and with a selection of pot plants at hand changes can be rung), they can be lifted out

and carried to the sink when water is needed, being returned after the surplus has drained away.

The one drawback, other than watering, to window boxes, the contents of which are planted out instead of being kept in pots, is sameness. It may be that some folk are satisfied to have one small selection of plants doing service for several months; but there are certainly others who like changes, and in such instances the box-plus-pot system becomes applicable.

We may now proceed to select and examine a set of plants which are eminently suited to cultivation in pots for the purpose of adorning flats, afterwards dealing with their cultivation.

With this object before us, we may first aim at a balance between plants grown for their foliage and plants chosen for their floral beauty. Many flat-dwellers, and, for the matter of that, householders too, with or without window boxes, grow foliage plants only in their rooms, confining the remainder of their gardening to cut flowers. Differing circumstances and varying tastes must exercise their sway in respect to this. Certainly the range of material in leaf-plants is wide, especially if we include in it, as we may do quite fairly, Palms and Ferns. Apart from these, there are Aspidistras, both green and variegated, Asparagus in variety, India-rubber Plants, Aralias (Fatsias), and Araucarias (Monkey Puzzle allies). All these endure room conditions, and with suitable soil and watering retain their health and beauty for many years.

More beautiful, but only suitable for temporary use, and meanwhile requiring nursing in warm greenhouses, are Crotons and Dracaenas. Lovely colour-harmonies can be provided by judicious associations of these exquisite plants and such flowers as winter-blooming Begonias, Cyclamens, and Primulas. Would that we could recommend their use confidently to all flat-dwellers and room-gardeners generally, but such is not the case.

Palms, and particularly such kinds as Cocos, Geonoma, Kentia, Latania, and Phoenix, are good room plants.

Among Ferns we find suitable material in Aspidiums (Holly Fern), Aspleniums, Nephrodiums, and Pterises (Ribbon Ferns), with the graceful Maidenhair as a reserve which responds admirably to careful treatment.

It is observable that there is no lack of material for adorning rooms with plants, even in cases where flowers are restricted to cut blooms. Where, however, flowering plants are admitted, such things as Zonal 'Geraniums' (Pelargoniums), Cinerarias, Cyclamens, certain winter- and spring-flowering Primulas, Clivias (Imantophyllums), Scarborough Lilies, Fuchsias, and Chrysanthemums must have first consideration as free (and in some cases continuous) bloomers which adapt themselves to room conditions when managed conscientiously. And to them may be added berry Solanums and berry-bearing Ardisia.

Finally, there are cut flowers, of which the range is as wide as the period of beauty, collectively considered, is long.

Selective and cultural hints may now be given of all the foregoing plants.

It happens not infrequently that more injury accrues to house plants in two holiday weeks than in the whole of the remaining fifty weeks of the year, and it may be suggested that, unless competent help can be obtained from a neighbour who is also interested in plants, it is worthwhile to put them under the care of a nurseryman for the duration of the holiday.

