Pot plants for interest and enjoyment

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POT PLANTS

FOR INTEREST and ENJOYMENT

By C. C. Hillary

Lantanas are suitable for both pots and hanging baskets. The specimen shown here is Lantana seowiana

POT plants provide a wealth of interest and give considerable pleasure to all those who enjoy having beautiful things around them. When the plants are carefully selected, there are nearly always some flowers available for the home, and the foliage types readily lend themselves to many kinds of indoor decoration.

The cultivation of plants in pots or other containers is not at all difficult. Commonsense is the main requirement. The others are a suitable potting soil and sufficient water to keep the pots moist. This requires little more than a gallon or two of water a day, unless the collection is a large one, and it is this fact that makes pot plants of so much value to those living in dry areas where ordinary gardening is often impossible, except, perhaps, for a brief period in winter.

A beautiful pot plant may be one that flowers, or a type grown for its foliage alone, but whatever it is, it should be a plant that makes a pleasing head of growth somewhat wider than the width of the container. This calls for a plant with a spreading habit of growth and there are many species suitable for the purpose. The additional requirement, when a plant such as a conifer is used, is that it should have even, symmetrical growth of good proportions.

COLOURFUL BLOOMS

When making up a collection of pot plants, it is always wise to devote a proportion of the pots to plants that are known to flower well. There will then be plenty of colour to blend with the various greens of the foliage plants. While it is desirable that most of the plants grown in containers should be perennials, or long-lived plants, the value of annuals should not be overlooked. A few grown each winter and summer would add a wealth of colour to any collection.

The Schizanthus, or poor man’s orchid, is one of the best annuals. With its hundreds of floral bells in many lovely colours, it makes a splendid pot plant for several months of each year. The golden
and crimson-coloured Celosias are also magnificent in pots and both are easy to grow. Then there are Godetias, especially the variety Sybil Sherwood; Clarkias, Portulacca, Pansies, Aquilegias, Anemones, Cineraria, Gilia, Lobelia, Nasturtium, Salvia (both red and blue), and Salpiglossis, all of which can be relied upon to give a good account of themselves when grown in suitable containers. In addition to the ordinary annual flowers, the value of bulbous flowers for pot work, such as the Hyacinth, Daffodil and Lachenalia, should not be overlooked.

SHRUBS ARE LONG-LASTING

For pot plants of more permanent character there are numerous kinds of shrubs, and other plants of perennial and herbaceous habit. Then there are the various kinds of maiden-hair fern (Adiantum), Fish Fern (Nephrolepis) and palms such as the Kentia and Phoenix Roebelenii.

Shrubs which readily lend themselves for growing in pots include Rhododendrons, Azaleas, Daphnes, Hydrangeas, Fuchsias, Veronica, Diosmas, Phyllanthus, Choisya ternata (Mexican Orange Blossom), Erica, Acalypha, Gardenia, Genista, Hibiscus Cooperii, Lantana Selowiana, Plumbago, Punica nana (dwarf pomegranate), Rondeletia, and the Cumquat. The last-named makes a really splendid ornamental for a porch or sunny verandah when grown in a half-barrel. Other suitable plants include the various varieties of Pelargonium, Geraniums, Gerbera, Acanthus, Agapanthus and Agathea.

CONTAINERS

The type of container makes a great deal of difference to the amount of care that a plant requires. Small pots tend to dry out more quickly than large ones and need more frequent watering. On the other hand, if a tiny plant is placed in a very large container, there is always a chance that the soil will become what is known as “soured” before the roots grow large enough to make full use of it.

Terra-cotta clay pots are suitable for most plants and they always look attractive when kept thoroughly cleaned. To keep them clean, they should be brushed regularly with a stiff brush soaked in soapy water. Kerosene tins and old oil drums

Fig. 1.—The plant on the left is the well-known Veronica, Blue Gem. There are several varieties of Veronica with blue and pink flowers which, with their attractive foliage, make them suitable subjects for potting. On the right is a Cyclamen. It’s rich colour and variegated leaves make it an attractive exhibit.
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make good containers for large plants, but they usually look unsightly unless painted on the outside. They also last longer when given a coat of cement wash on the inside before being used. But the finest large containers are the half-barrels made of polished sheoak, with painted bands around the outside. These can be bought at most nursery stores at moderate cost. They last for years and have a handsome appearance. I know of nothing more suitable for a Cumquat or a large Azalea.

DRAINAGE IS IMPORTANT

All pots and containers must be adequately drained, since quick and efficient drainage is essential to the health of all plants. Most clay pots are provided with holes of sufficient size in the bottom, but tins, drums, and half-barrels should have not less than five half-inch holes pierced or drilled in various parts of the bottom.

Plenty of drainage material in the shape of crocks, broken tiles or small stones should be placed over the holes and over this should be placed a layer of decayed leafy matter or half-rotted straw. This material is to prevent the soil from washing down into the crocks and interfering with the drainage. The pots are then ready to receive the soil mixture.

PREPARING THE SOIL

It is essential that a good soil mixture should be prepared since it has to last a long time and it is advisable to make it up some weeks beforehand so that it may be nicely mellowed before being placed in the containers. Some good surface loam from an old pasture, sand, well-rotted cow or horse manure and well-decayed leafy compost are the ingredients required and these should be mixed together as follows: five parts loam, one part of sand, two parts old manure, one part of leafy compost. To every barrowload of this mixture should be added a four-inch potful of blood and bone manure. The loam and other ingredients should be spread out over a cement drive or similar place and shovelled back and forth until everything is thoroughly well blended.

This soil will be found suitable for all ferns, shrubs and perennial plants, but when used for annuals, it is usually advisable to add a little less than a half-part of air-slaked lime. It is most important, however, that lime should not be included in any soil mixture used for Camellias, Azaleas, Rhododendrons and Daphnes. These plants abhor lime in any form and

Fig. 2.—The Cumquat, a specimen of the Nagami variety of which is shown here, has dark green, almost polished, foliage and bright orange fruits. Grown in a tub it makes a colourful verandah ornament.
for this reason wood ashes should not be placed in the bottom of the containers for drainage purposes.

POTTING HINTS

Actual potting is work you learn with practice. The more you pot the greater your skill. All potting should be done fairly firmly and care taken to see that the soil is firmed at the side of the pot as well as close in to the plant. Evergreen plants should be repotted without disturbing the soil ball around the roots and all plants should be potted at much the same depth as they stood when growing in a previous pot or in the nursery.

During the planting, the soil should be filled in around the plants until within about an inch of the top with small pots and to within two inches of the top with large containers. These spaces are to allow sufficient room for watering. To make sure that the soil is firmed sufficiently around the sides of the pots, it is advisable to tamp it down, as filling proceeds, with a blunt-ended stick. Soil used for potting should be just moist and no more. If a ball of soil taken in the hand crumbles when pressed, the moisture content should be about right.

WATERING AND FEEDING

Watering is important. Pot plants can enjoy only what is given them and no more. They cannot stretch thirsty roots into new areas in search of moisture. Overwatering must also be avoided. Watch your plants carefully and water as often as is necessary to keep the soil moist, but not wet. A simple way of determining whether a pot plant requires water or not is to tap the side of the pot in the middle with a wooden hammer. If the sound made seems hollow or ringing, water is required, but a dull, heavy noise indicates an ample moisture content.

Feeding with liquid manure will also be necessary with most pot plants, because the soil mixture gradually loses its plant food as the result of frequent watering. It should be commenced about a month after potting and then continued at monthly intervals.

Liquid manure suitable for most plants can be made by steeping a quantity of horse, cow, or poultry manure in a tub of water. It will be of suitable strength when its colour resembles that of weak tea. Darker and stronger solutions should be broken down with additional water before being applied. Small plants may be given up to half-a-pint, but large plants will probably enjoy two or three pints. To ensure that no plant will have a "hang-over," all plants should be given a drink of fresh water before being fed with liquid manure.

Fig. 3.—This attractive dwarf conifer, Thuja occidentalis, is of the book-leaf type and its golden foliage makes it a popular and pleasing subject for potting.
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