



THE CULTIVATION OF THE PALM

By Eben E. Rexford

PERHAPS the most popular plant in use today for decorative purposes in hall, parlor, sitting-room and library is the well-known Rubber Plant (*Ficus elastica*), with its great thick, shining foliage and stately habit, but this popularity is not enjoyed because it is considered the most beautiful of all decorative plants, but because it is of comparatively easy culture and succeeds where most other plants fail. The amateur who does not succeed with other plants may expect a reasonable degree of satisfaction from the *Ficus* if he will give even ordinary care to it. It is for this reason that we see it occupying the position of honor in many homes. But if you say anything to the mistress of the house about her beautiful plant the chances are that she will reply by saying that she likes it because it requires so little care, but she "does wish she could grow Palms." To own a fine specimen of Palm has been the height of her ambition for many years. She has invested a good many dollars in Palms at the florist's, and she has hoped that success might ultimately crown her efforts, but each attempt has ended disastrously. The leaves would after a little turn brown at the tips, and then take on a sickly yellow hue all over. Instead of producing new leaves the plant would soon lose all its old ones, and by-and-by, after waiting patiently for a turn for the better, and hoping against hope until she became discouraged, the plant would be turned out-of-doors to recover or die. And generally death resulted, and gradually the conviction came that there must be some knack about growing Palms that the amateur could not hope to attain. "It is really discouraging," said a lady to me not long since. "The plants that they offer for sale at the greenhouses are almost always fine and healthy specimens. If I ask the florist about their adaptability to culture in the house he will tell me there is no trouble in cultivating them. 'Just water them well and see that they're kept out of the sun—that's all you need to do.' If I've heard one florist say that I've heard a dozen. Past experience ought to have taught me wisdom, and convinced me that I haven't the 'knack' of Palm growing, and am not likely to acquire it, but it hasn't, and I buy a plant every year and bring it home, only to see it sicken and die after a little, just as all the others have. If there's any secret about Palm growing please tell me what it is."

THERE is no secret—no "knack"—about the successful cultivation of the Palm. To grow this plant well one must have a knowledge of its habits and requirements, and attempt to make conditions favorable to its development. Of course we cannot expect to so change conditions that they will not continue to be unfavorable, in some degree, but we can so modify them by intelligent consideration of what is wrong, and an attempt to overcome the obstacles in the way, that it will be possible to succeed with plants whose culture under unmodified conditions it would be folly to attempt. The fact is, most plants are willing to make some concessions. If they see that you are really anxious to have them do well, and are considerate as far as possible of their likes and dislikes, they will not insist on having things all their own way, but will adapt themselves to circumstances to a considerable degree.

The amateur florist who has given but little attention to the cultivation of plants, and the difference in conditions under which they are grown, goes to the greenhouse and selects whatever plant suits her, and has it sent home, expecting it will continue to flourish. But in a short time she notices that a change is taking place, and wonders what is amiss. She fancies that perhaps the plant needs more water, and more is given. No improvement takes place, and more water is applied, water being, in the minds of many beginners in floriculture, a panacea for all the ills that plants are heir to. Sometimes the idea comes that the soil may not be rich enough, and a fertilizer is made use of. This, fortunately for the plant, hastens the end, and it is not long before it is dead. The fact is, the conditions prevailing in the greenhouse are entirely different from those prevailing in the living-room, and these should be considered.

THE hot, dry air of the living-room lacks that vital principle which the air of the greenhouse had in it, and encourages the development of insect enemies which rapidly sap the plant of its impoverished life-blood.

It will be understood from this that it is necessary to modify the conditions characteristic of the living-room as much as possible. The air must be moistened by the evaporation of water about the plant, or by the application of it to its foliage. Fresh air must be admitted, to take the place of that whose vitality has been burned out of it by too intense heat. The plant must have a place near the window where direct light can exert its beneficial effect on the soil. Care must be taken to give only enough water to keep the soil moist. Good drainage must be provided, also. This item is too frequently overlooked altogether. But you cannot expect to grow good plants if it is ignored. If water is applied liberally to a plant not having good drainage, a large share of it is retained by the soil, and this induces, as has been said, souring of the soil and decay of the roots. When I find a Palm whose leaves are turning brown at the tips I first of all examine the soil in which it is growing. In the majority of cases I find the earth a wet, soggy mass. The roots show more or less disease. The first thing I do is to re-pot the plant, providing the best of drainage. Water well, and then set the plant aside, in good light, but out of the sun, to get a fresh start. Give only enough water to keep the soil moist until signs of growth are seen. Little water is required by a dormant plant. It may be weeks before the plant begins to grow, but as long as it seems to be holding its own the chances are that it is slowly establishing itself in the new soil, and that by-and-by it will reward your patience with a stronger and healthier growth than it had before you bestowed such tender and patient care upon it.

IT does not seem to be generally understood that a plant not standing in direct light does not require as much water as the plant near the glass. It is not taken into consideration that the less light a plant gets the less rapidly evaporation takes place, consequently the less frequently it will be necessary to apply water. Some amateurs always apply the same quantity daily, no matter where their plants stand, nor what the condition of the soil is. This is all wrong. I believe that more plants are killed by over-watering than in any other way. The rule of giving water only when the surface of the soil looks dry should be adhered to. Plants near the glass, or in sunshine, and those in active growth, will, perhaps, require water daily, but those not so situated, and those not growing much, will require much less. Therefore the necessity of adhering to the rule, and letting the looks of the soil govern you in this matter is one that will be only too apparent.

WHILE the Palm is able to endure a good deal of heat it does not require the high temperature that many seem to think necessary to its successful culture. Indeed, some of the finest specimens I have ever seen grew in a room which was kept several degrees cooler than the living-room. But a temperature of seventy or seventy-five degrees suits them very well if care is taken to give some humidity to the air. This can be done by keeping water constantly evaporating on stove or register, and by daily showering of the plants. Observe that I say showering. I do not mean simply sprinkling. The plants should be wet all over their foliage. Of course it will be necessary to remove them to some place where the application of water will not do injury to the room when this shower-bath is given. This is some trouble, but it is slight compared with the benefit the plants will receive from it. Once a fortnight it is well to go over the plants with an infusion of whale oil or Sulpho-Tobacco soap, applying it with a soft brush to every part. This will prevent insects from establishing themselves on them. Be sure to get at the depressions between the leaves and the main stalk, as there is where the mealy bug will be likely to take up his quarters. Scale will take possession of all parts of the plant, if allowed to do so, but frequent scrubbing, as advised, will prevent his doing any injury. It is quite natural for old leaves to turn yellow and die off. Remove them carefully as soon as they become unsightly. Do not strip nor tear them away, as many do, thus often injuring the plant, but cut them away smoothly with a sharp knife.

WHILE a Palm may be kept entirely away from the sunshine to advantage it cannot be kept in a shady place, at a distance from good light, without injury. If you use your Palms for decorative purposes about the mantel, or in corners of the room, do not allow them to remain there any longer than is absolutely necessary. Give them a place near the glass again as soon as possible.

Never shower a Palm and allow the sun to shine on it while water stands on the leaves. If you do, more than likely brown spots will appear, making the foliage look as if blistered or scorched. It will be necessary to look out for this if you have a greenhouse to keep your plants in, as a bubble in the glass of the roof often focuses the rays of the sun upon the plant, and if it is wet at the time it is sure to be disfigured. The best soil for the varieties of Palms in general cultivation is made up of ordinary garden loam and a little sand. They have strong roots and like a heavier, firmer soil than most plants.

IFREQUENTLY receive letters in which the complaint is made by the writer that her Palm seems to be inclined to take to stilts. "Its roots won't stay in the soil. Why?" I do not know why they do not, but I can assure the complainants that no harm is done to the plant by this elevation of its crown above the soil, apparently by an extension of its roots at the top instead of the bottom, as is usually the case with plant roots. If unsightly, pot the plant lower when you give it a shift. Perhaps the use of deeper pots would do away with this behavior of the plant in some degree, as it likes to send its roots down deep into the soil. I have often wondered why a deep pot was not constructed for Palm growing. One of ordinary width, but of twice the depth of the common pot, would be admirably adapted to the needs of this plant. Will not some flower-pot maker take advantage of this suggestion and give us a Palm pot? If made in the shape of a vase, with tasteful ornamentation, such a pot would add to the effect of the plant it held, and do away with the necessity of a jardinière. If I were buying a Palm for use in the sitting-room or parlor I would buy it about mid-summer, because, at that time, it will be growing in an air that is without artificial heat, and when you bring it home you can so care for it that the change from greenhouse quarters to those in the home can be made less noticeable than at any other time of the year. You can accustom the plant to the conditions which prevail in the room it is to grow in without obliging it to undergo violent or abrupt changes of temperature. This could not be done if you deferred the purchase of it until after the plant had been subjected to greenhouse heat in fall. You will find that a plant can be made to adapt itself to new conditions much more successfully by degrees than all at once.

THE changes to a plant bought in mid-summer will come about so gradually by fall that it will not mind them much. Therefore buy your Palms in summer, and allow them to become familiar with their new home by slow and easy stages. On no account plant a Palm in a jardinière unless it has some means of drainage. If the pot in which the plant grows is not ornamental it can be set into a jardinière when doing duty in parlor or hall. If jardinières large enough to accommodate specimens of good size are not obtainable the pot can be concealed by a covering of light silk or muslin of an unobtrusive color. A prettier covering, however—in fact the prettiest covering of all—is provided by some vine of drooping character, which will not only cover the surface of the soil but hang over the sides of the pot in such a manner as to afford all the concealment necessary. These vines may be grown in shallow pans for this purpose, and used either in the pans or turned out of them and crowded together about the base of the Palm. Very often a pot of Ivy can be used to excellent advantage. The pot in which it is growing can be placed behind the Palm, and its branches trained over and about the larger pot in a carelessly graceful fashion that will be very pleasing and effective.

The best varieties of Palm for amateurs to undertake the cultivation of are: *Latania Borbonica*, the Fan Palm; *Phoenix reclinata*, of spreading habit; *Areca lutescens*, very graceful and of easy cultivation; *Kentia Belmoreana* and *Fosteriana*, two popular and beautiful varieties; *Sieforthia elegans*, a stately kind with long and finely arching fronds; *Rhapis flabelliformis*, a kind sending up several stems from the crown, unlike most varieties, thus giving us a more compact plant than any of the other kinds named. Palms do not require such large pots as many amateurs give them. To give one a large pot while it is still a small plant is a mistaken kindness. Wait until the old pot is well filled with roots before shifting it. In repotting disturb the roots as little as possible.

EDITOR'S NOTE—Mr. Rexford's answers to his correspondents, under the title of "Floral Helps and Hints," will be found on page 33 of this issue of the JOURNAL.