



SOME SECRETS ABOUT FLOWERS.

By S. BALLARD.



They are back again at the season of chrysanthemums, and what woman is there who does not wish to decorate her rooms with great bunches of tawny-yellow curly things, or balls of pure whiteness, or those sprawly ones of that peculiar shade that reminds one of pink jelly-fish washed up on a sea-shore.

But the chrysanthemum is still rather the flower of the rich in England, and it is only the favoured few who can often indulge in big combinations of colours.

But when you have got a beautiful bunch arranged in a favourite vase, how it does go to your heart to see them drooping. If you notice, you will see that it is not the flowers that droop, but the leaves get flabby and hang down, which imparts a shabby look to the whole thing before the flowers have gone at all. People try to remedy this by breaking the stalks shorter and gradually taking off the withered leaves; but let me impart to you the "tips" on the subject that I got in the Flowery Land, Japan, where the Mikado's crest is a sixteen-petal chrysanthemum.

The chrysanthemum blooms there at the same time as it does in England, and the first autumn I was there, I admired the chrysanthemum arrangements very much. In Japanese houses, it is usual to decorate the room with one big vase standing on the ground, and containing a few, sometimes only three, chrysanthemums, whose stalks are not less than two feet long. These are put in the vase when they are quite small, tightly-curled up buds, and they gradually expand till they are huge flowers. The Japanese take great pleasure in watching the gradual unfolding of a bud.

I too wished to see the buds unfold and the glossy leaves standing out boldly from the stalk, so I bought my chrysanthemums and stuck them in, but alas, the results were very different. The leaves drooped, and long before the bud had become a flower, the shabby look of the withering leaves made it necessary to throw them away.

The next time that I went to the flower-shop I told the man what had happened. He shook his head gravely, and said that I had condescended to buy the best chrysanthemums, and I must have done something to them to make them behave in such a way.

What had I done to them? I began to explain that I had cut them short.

"Not with scissors?" he exclaimed; and when I admitted that I had done it with scissors, a groan went round the shop, and one

old man (who was spending endless time in choosing a few branches of green leaves) came forward and told me that I had made an "awful" mistake.

This gross stupidity made such an impression, that even two years afterwards, when selling me flowers, the man of the shop would say pleadingly, "And you won't use scissors?"

My servants also seemed to consider me incapable of dealing with flowers, though I was quite accustomed to arranging them in England, and I at last came to the conclusion that I had better get to the bottom of some of the mysteries, and so I hired a flower teacher.

The art of arranging and preserving flowers is one which all Japanese girls of good position learn, and there are certificated teachers who go to the schools and also give private lessons. There are a good many trade secrets which pupils may not teach others; they can only be learnt from a proper teacher.

The polite little lady who came to teach me, gave me hints of many and wonderful methods. In England, flowers have always been strict teetotallers, drinking only water; but in Japan, *saké* is injected into the stalk by means of a squirt. It seemed to me an extraordinary idea to keep up the spirits of a flower by means of a stimulant, but it is largely practised.

I told my flower teacher, however, that I wanted to know only the simple means of keeping flowers, such as could be practised at home without any implements, and what I pass on to you, as really worthy of attention because of their simplicity and the wonderful way in which they make flowers last, are the following—

Supposing you wish to arrange chrysanthemums, gather them, if possible, the day before you are going to use them. After breaking the stalks to the length you wish, hold them in the hot embers of the fire (not in the flame) until you have well burnt half an inch.

Then place them in water that will cover a good quantity of the leaves. I generally put them into a ewer full of water. They must be left all night, and arranged the next morning.

Another way is, instead of burning, to hammer the stalks until an inch at least is smashed.

An old Japanese woman who lived with me was very successful with her flowers; she would gather them as quite small buds, and they always blossomed beautifully; she always hammered the ends of the stalks most vigorously.

I asked my flower-teacher what she considered to be the reason for hammering or burning the ends. Her theory was, that with such a flower as a chrysanthemum, the stalk is

too thin to take up moisture enough for flower and leaves, but by putting the whole thing into water for a night, a quantity of water is absorbed by the leaves, and the burning prevents this escaping through the stalk. I do not know if this theory of sap running out of a flower at the stalk is correct from a botanical point of view, but this treatment is particularly good for garden chrysanthemums, for they generally have so many leaves, and can be gathered with long stalks. Nothing looks handsomer than half-a-dozen contrasting colours with long stalks covered with their beautiful leaves standing well out.

The same treatment of burning is equally good for wall-flower. It makes one sad to see a bunch of delicious sweet wall-flower gathered and put in water, only to be taken out after a couple of days because the heads which have the most buds, instead of gradually unfolding, are hanging down. If the ends are burned and the flower put in water so that a few of the leaves are under water, the stalks will remain perfectly stiff, and the buds come out.

To those who have to do with church decorations, let me impart what I thought a most valuable "tip." You know how often you get a beautiful flower, say a dahlia or a Christmas rose which won't "look the right way." Perhaps there are two on one stalk, and you try gently to persuade them both to look the same way. You bend one round but it jerks back, then you get a little cross and bend it more severely, and snap—your flower is broken. But you can make the flower look any way you choose if you only manage it in the Japanese way.

Hold the stalk near the fire so as to warm it gently, as you might warm your own fingers, then, with finger and thumb, stroke the stalk, bending it slightly in the direction you wish. It seems as if the warmth relaxed the muscles of the flower, if one may so express it, and made it pliable under the fingers. Indeed I was quite astonished to see how much manipulation and bending flowers will undergo. There is a great deal of what I may term flower "massage" in Japan. A teacher will take a stiff branch of plum blossom, and spending perhaps half an hour over it, will gradually stroke it into what are considered the correct lines of beauty. And this is done without in any way injuring the flower, for the branch, though gathered with the barest suggestions of buds, will blossom profusely after this treatment.

There is much that is too artificial for our taste in the Japanese flower arrangements, but they understand both how to make them last and how to bring them out, when gathered as buds, much better than we do.