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Housekeepers' Chat

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NOT FOR PUBLICATION

Subject: "The Care of Ferns." Prepared by W. R. Beattie, Bureau of Plant Industry, United States Department of Agriculture.

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Since the last time W. R. B., the garden adviser, made a talk, many of my radio friends have asked about the care of ferns in the house. That's why I told W. R. B. that I'd do something nice for him sometime, if he'd tell me all about ferns.

"All about ferns," said he. "That's quite a big order, Aunt Sammy, but I'll do my best. Ferns are one of the most interesting groups of ornamental plants. They vary from the tiniest little plants to great tree ferns. They grow from the far North to the tropics. They are found growing wild on the mountain tops and in the valleys, along the streams, and even on the trunks and branches of trees.

"But I suppose that you and your audience are interested chiefly in the ferns we grow in the ordinary home; what kinds are best adapted to growing in the home, and how they should be cared for.

"In the first place, the kind of fern to recommend for growing in the home depends mainly upon the purpose for which it is to be used. Some of the smaller growing types make beautiful table decorations. However, if you want a large specimen plant, which will occupy a prominent place in a bay window, buy a Boston fern, or one of its forms. Ferns are grown for their foliage, so, in selecting a plant for your home, get one which will have attractive green foliage even under adverse conditions."

"What do you mean by adverse conditions?" I asked.

"Ordinary house conditions," said W. R. B. "In the first place, the temperature of the modern home is, as a rule, too high for most house plants, including ferns. Then ferns are easily injured by the products of combustion, as well as by any escaping gas or fumes from oil or gas cooking stoves or heaters. Perhaps nothing would be quite so discouraging to a nice fern as to be compelled to live in a room where an ordinary oil heater supplements the heating system of the house. The old-fashioned open burner gas lights are a source of monoxide gas which is death to ferns, but these gas lights are no longer very common.

"The greatest danger to ferns nowadays comes from gas escaping from gas logs, gas heaters, or gas ranges, which are not properly ventilated into a chimney."

"What about soil for ferns," was my next question.

"Ferns should be planted in rather light soil," said my friend. "In their native home in the woods, they are found growing in leaf mold and decayed vegetable matter. The nearer you come to giving them their natural soil, the better your chances for success, in growing ferns in the house. The best scheme is to go to the florist, and get soil for planting your ferns, or get the florist to plant them for you. When you get a fern from the florist, it will be in the right kind of soil, but there comes a time when the fern needs repotting; then it is necessary to get new soil. A good soil for ferns is a mixture of very thoroughly rotted manure (formerly called old compost, by the gardeners), mixed with about equal parts of sand and loam.

"The leaf mold and woods' earth in which ferns are often found growing wild, taken by itself, does not make a good soil for the ferns in the house, because it dries out too quickly. The addition of the compost and loam helps to correct this difficulty. Any more questions, Aunt Sammy?"

"Yes, please. I know that ferns need dividing, and re-potting occasionally. When is the best time to divide and re-pot them?"

"In the spring or early fall," replied W. R. B. "In repotting ferns, remove most of the old soil from about their roots, trim away any old or decayed roots, and re-pot the ferns in a fern pan or pot, that is just a trifle larger than the one from which they were removed. Don't fail to put plenty of 'drainage' in the bottom of the new pot. This drainage consists of a layer of broken flower pot or pebbles, completely covering the bottom of the pot, especially the drainage hole. This prevents the soil from settling into the bottom of the pot, and makes it possible for extra water to drain out, should too much water be given your fern. Of course, you need saucers under the fern pots. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes, sir, but it brings up another. How often should ferns be watered?"

"When it comes to watering," explained the garden advisor, "remember that ferns require frequent watering, and that the soil should be kept reasonably moist, and never allowed to dry out. On the other hand, don't over-water your ferns, or allow water to stand in the saucer under the fern pot; if you do, you are sure to have a sour, soggy soil, and the plants will turn yellow, and die. Careless watering causes the loss of many house ferns; in fact, as many ferns die from careless watering as from the effect of gases and bad atmospheric conditions in the house."

I asked W. R. B. how much water should be given a fern a day. He says that a medium sized fern can use about a cupful of water every day. Of course, the time of year, and the kind of heat used in the home, makes a difference in the amount of water needed.

Have you ever noticed how beautiful a fern is, when it comes from the florist? That's because ferns grown in the greenhouse are kept at the right temperature, and the air is usually full of moisture. No wonder a fern gets to feeling blue, and looking distressed, when we take it from comfortable greenhouse quarters and place it in a room where the air is very dry.

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But after all, says W.R.B., ferns are about the most satisfactory of the non-blooming houseplants. Don't forget to give your ferns plenty of sunlight. Most people have the idea that because ferns are found growing in shady places in the woods, they want almost total shade, but if you will observe closely, you will find that even the ferns which grow in the most shady places get sunlight part of the day. So give your ferns sunshine part of the time.

To sum up what W. R. B. has said about house ferns -- never allow them to dry out; keep them at a moderate temperature; and be careful that no gas -- either the gas itself or the fumes from burned gasses, escape into the air of the room. Give your fern a reasonable amount of sunshine, and give it a bath occasionally. Never use warm water to bathe the fern, and don't have the water too cold.

There's one more point I might mention. If earthworms get started in the soil in which your ferns are growing, repot them in clean soil, or water the plants with a weak solution of lime water. However, since the lime itself may be injurious to the fern, it is really better to repot the fern in clean soil, removing all the old soil that contains the earth worms.

There -- if you think of anything more you want to know about ferns, or other house plants, for that matter, just let me know. I'll send your letters right over to W. R. B., and I'm sure he'll answer them for you.

I have something unusual for you tomorrow -- a Chinese dinner -- so please come prepared to write at least two recipes.

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