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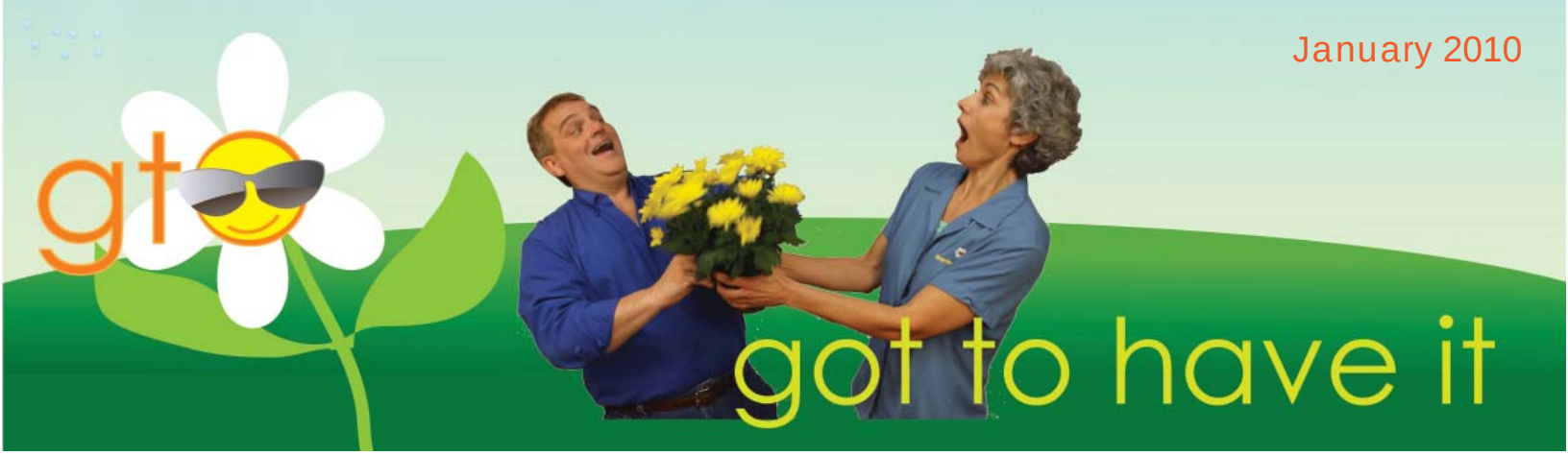

The Historic Need for Houseplants

by William McClenathan

The holidays are over, decorations have been packed away for another year, you look around your home and somehow...it seems a little bare. What better way to fill those voids than with houseplants? Not only do they add color, warmth and dimension to a room but they also add oxygen and clean the air by removing several harmful toxins, not the least of which is carbon monoxide.

No one knows for sure when this desire to bring nature indoors began, but there is evidence that houseplants have been in homes for thousands of years. In ancient Egypt, plants could be found indoors gracing urns and troughs. The ancient Greeks and Romans would often create lush atriums in their homes. By the 15th century, explorers and early horticulturists would bring new and unique plants back from the new world that required special controlled climates to survive in Europe. A necessity is the mother of invention; the 'orangeries' were born which were the precursors to our modern day greenhouses and conservatories.

The desire for houseplants seemed to have exploded in Victorian times. Their favorites like palms, Cast Iron Plant (Aspidistra) and ferns, are a few of the most popular plants for use indoors today. Yet, it was not until the 1950's that houseplants became popular in America, since most homes up until this time did not have a form of climate control that the houseplants required before the turn of the century. And conservatories or greenhouses were just too cost prohibitive.

Today, houseplants can be seen growing in every office space and mall, church and synagogue, apartment and home. It's rare to go into any indoor space which doesn't have a plant growing somewhere.

It is through this cultural evolution and test of time that many of the best and easiest plants to grow have proven themselves. Looking back again at the Victorians we can find many of our favorites today. Victorians believed a 'home with taste' simply couldn't exist without indoor plants. Many of the plants we grow outdoors here in the Northwest were considered the zenith of high fashion back then as houseplants. Fuchsias, abutilons (flowering maples), Jasmine Officinal's (Poets Jasmine) and Heliotrope were just a few.

Another generational houseplant that isn't considered a houseplant in some zones is the Aspidistra (Cast Iron Plant). The common name alone tells us why this plant was thought of as one of the easiest to grow indoors. Darkness or light, too wet or too dry, nothing seemed to kill it. Recently available, we now have the beautiful speckled

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variety, Milky Way, with its white/yellowish dots on dark leaves resembling the constellations. All Aspidistra have long, narrow, green leaves that look similar to the Peace Lily (Spathaphylum). Although their bloom is insignificant, but oh so cool, the ease of which one can maintain them certainly makes up for the lack of flower.

There is still nothing today that reminds us of Victorian times quite like the long, graceful fronds of a fern hanging languidly over a plant stand. Their ease of maintenance and graceful beauty quickly caught the eye of the discerning taste of our European counterparts. Sometime in the late 1800's the Boston fern (Nephrolepsis exalta) was introduced, becoming quite the rage. But there were also Holly ferns (Polystichum lonchitis), Sword ferns (Nephrolepsis cordifolia) and Maidenhair ferns (Adiantum pedatum). Not only were they beautiful, but they only required low to medium light and consistent moisture. Today's ferns offer even more colors and shapes than could have ever been imagined back then.

Victorians loved them, but today's palms have often been given a bad wrap. Many people think them temperamental or difficult at best but these stately dames are one of the best behaved and elegant plants you could grow indoors. The key with them is light requirements. Remember that many of them are understory growth small trees so not being in a southern window would suit them just fine. One can't help but think of the parlor palm (Chamaedorea elegans) when thinking of easy houseplants. If the place you want to set this plant cast a shadow...it's probably TOO light for it. Other than that, spider mites can sometimes be a concern, so keep a cursory eye out for them and nip them in the bud quickly. I use Fertilome insecticide granules in my house as I really don't like to spray organic or chemical sprays indoors. It's so easy to use, just follow the directions for the right amount per pot/plant size, sprinkle in...water... and there you go. The product keeps your plants pest free for about six weeks at which time another dose would be required. Bonide also makes a good granular product.

If you are feeling a little disconnected from nature this winter, history has proven it is only natural. January is a great month to visit your local independent garden center to see what little piece of Mother Nature you might want to bring indoors.