

The Gardening Page

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P u b l i c L i b r a r y



The House Plant



“Connections with gardens, even small ones,
even potted plants,
can become windows to the inner life.”

Patricia R. Barrett

~ A Conversation with Caryn, NPL Reference Librarian & Writer,
and Keeper of Plants ~

Sally from the Norwalk Public Library: Hi Caryn! Thanks for joining us today on **The Gardening Page!** First, let me share with our readers the fact that you are a reference librarian and writer at the Norwalk Public Library who loves plants and flowers, and gardening.

Many people live in complexes— such as an apartment house or condominium— and do not have access to any outdoor garden areas of their own. Many don't even have a balcony or patio on which to plant container gardens. One cannot underestimate the house plant!

On speaking with you recently about your house plants, I began thinking how beautiful it is to have flowers and plants filling the interior of our homes; and what joy it brings! (I am warmly reminded of Emily Dickinson's conservatory—jutting just off the front of the Homestead— that her father had built for her.) And I began to recollect certain conversations we've had at the library about your various plants: **violet, orchid, Dieffenbachia, Amaryllis.**



Emily Dickinson's Conservatory at the Homestead
(she could enter it from indoors, through the library)

Especially during the pandemic, when we are all inside so much, house plants bring a sense of solace, peace, and beauty. They bring out our nurturing side, and are nurturing in return.

I understand your Garden Club in your complex will not be doing raised garden beds this year because of COVID; something you were really looking forward to. How has this impacted your life? Has this made you turn toward your house plants with even greater joy?

Caryn: Yes, I was very disappointed to learn that we wouldn't have the option of planting in our community garden this year because of the pandemic. If ever there were a perfect time for gardening, this is it! It gets you outdoors; is usually a solitary activity; brings peace and serenity; and delivers boundless rewards, satisfaction, and natural beauty to your life. I did have a momentary thought of going rogue and sneaking out there to fill all the raised beds with plants and flowers, but I let the moment pass and contented myself with my house plants.

I wouldn't say that it gave me greater joy for I've appreciated growing house plants since I was a five-year old, following my grandfather on his Sunday morning rounds, watering his house plants with a blue and white china teapot. This was his ritual, which soon became mine. (Interestingly, I learned years later, that my grandfather's family may once have been farmers in a rural village outside of Vienna, Austria, pre-1900.)



Sally: Caryn, that is such a lovely image of you as a child following your grandfather on his morning rounds as he watered his house plants with a teapot!

Can you tell us a little about your raised bed of last year, and how it looked? Did you grow flowers or vegetables, or both?

Caryn: The raised beds were actually raised, rectangular planter boxes, approximately 6'x 3' in size. Others planted flowers or vegetables, or a combination of both. A friend, who is a long-time master gardener, had given me a dozen **canna lily rhizomes** that she had dug from her garden the previous fall and overwintered in her garage. I had planted **Asiatic lilies** previously, when I had a large garden, but the **Cannas** were new to me. All I did was dig the holes, cover the rhizomes with soil, water and repeat. To my surprise, and utter delight, the leaves and stems grew straight and sturdy to nearly 5' tall, with bright red blooms stretching their heads into the sky!

Sally: Please share a little about the set-up in your home? I think you told me about a large sunny window (maybe a bay window) area just perfect for plants? Illustrate for us, if you would, the plants in your home!

Caryn: My apartment has a southwest orientation with floor-to-ceiling windows. I keep **African violets**, **cacti** and **orchids** in a southern window and adjust the blinds to filter the light, depending on time of day and year. Other plants like the **Dieffenbachia**, **snake plant**, and **peace lilies** have spots throughout the apartment near west-facing windows.



Caryn's peace lilies



Caryn's snake plant, 30 years old!



cacti

Sally: Can you tell us in detail about your Dieffenbachia, and its rich history? And your Aunt?

Caryn: My Aunt J inherited her love of plants and gardening from her father (it skipped my mother and found me!). She could always be found puttering around her garden or fussing over her three rooms filled with house plants. Each year

we'd be treated to home grown **tomatoes**, **cucumbers**, **peppers**, **zucchini**, and lush **pears** for dessert.



She returned from every vacation with cacti from the southwest and exotic flowering plants from Hawaii. When planting became too difficult for her, she stood over the landscaper and directed him on the placement of each seed, bulb, and plant.





“One happy plant!”

Aunt J's Dieffenbachia today!

Upon her passing two years ago, there was a houseful of plants that needed tending. As the only other “plant person” in the family, I was given first choice to select the plants I wanted. I chose an **African violet**, a half-dozen small **cacti**, a **Phalaenopsis orchid**, and two rangy 3’ tall **Dieffenbachia**. The other plants went to good homes, and everyone who came to pay respects to Aunt J left with one of her plants.

I took the two Dieffenbachia to Gilberti’s Nursery in Westport to have them repotted into one large clay planter, with sufficient room for the roots to grow and support to keep the plants upright. The plant is watered and fertilized once per week, and the planter gets rotated periodically to keep it from tilting too much in one direction. Today, the Dieffenbachia is verging on 9’ tall! We have 10’ ceilings,

so I'll need to learn how to top off the growth pretty soon. This is one happy plant, and I think Aunt J would be pleased.



Aunt J's Dieffenbachia knows no bounds!

One word of caution: commonly known as dumb cane or mother-in-law's tongue, Dieffenbachia, when ingested, causes oral irritation, vomiting, and difficulty swallowing in dogs and cats.



Caryn's little love, Tango

Sally: Thank you for mentioning that. So many plants—house or garden— are toxic to pets. It is important for people to know.

What attracts you to **violets**? That was my Grandmother's favorite flower. I remember when I was little and stayed over at her house, she showed me how to water the plants on her plant stand— I remember the violets. They are a beautiful flower.



Caryn: **African violets** make me cheerful. Their beautifully vivid flowers, range in color from snowy white to pink, fuchsia, and burgundy, to shades of pale blue to violet, and bloom throughout the year. Even during the gloomy days of late winter, my violets pop-up their colorful blooms to brighten their perch in my kitchen window. Easy to care for, they prefer tepid or room temperature water, which I mix with African violet food. They can be watered from top or bottom. If watering from the top, I try not to wet the leaves; if from the bottom, I let the plant soak up water for about 20 minutes, and then empty the saucer to keep the roots from rotting.



Sally: To what do you attribute your ability to keep house plants alive for so long?

Caryn: Love, nurturing, and joy – similar to kids and pets!

Sally: And your extreme dedication, and meticulous care!

Tell us about your **orchids**. The orchids you have now, and the ones you've had over the years. What attracts you to orchids? People care for orchids in so many different ways, and each person seems to criticize the next in regard to watering them! Different things seem to work for different people. How do you care for your orchids, and what luck have you had? Do you cut yours down after they die in order to allow them to regenerate?



Caryn: **Orchids** are my challenge. I've admired their amazing beauty, artistry, and simple elegance for a long time; especially the way they can be incorporated into a room's décor.

Two year's ago, my husband surprised me with an extravagant arrangement of **eight white orchids** as a centerpiece for a large kitchen island. The florist's care instructions said to mist the moss in which the orchids were planted once a week, and to cut back the stems of spent flowers. I followed the instructions too well, and over the following months, I watched my orchids wither and die one by one.

We returned to the florist with the arrangement, had new orchids planted to replace the dead ones, and were reassured that the care instructions were correct. Of course, after some time, the new orchids began to look as bad as the originals. I knew enough about plants in general to suspect that my poor orchids were drying-up from lack of water and food. My suspicions were confirmed while speaking with you at the library. So I repotted the remaining three orchids separately in tree bark medium, and began bottom-feeding them water and orchid food solution once a week.

Today, only one of the eight orchids has survived, but it's hanging on. It has two new leaves and has new roots. I'm not giving up, and hope it will flower one day! My two other orchids are both growing new leaves, but there's no sign of buds, yet. This is an ongoing learning experience for me.



Hoping!





Sally: Yes, I remember our conversation. I worked in the flower shop of an exceptional florist for a time (just before taking my current position at the library), and that is where I was taught to water the orchid just like any other plant: give it a good drink, and then allow the water to drain out before setting it back in place. Then do not water it again until it feels dry when you stick your finger down into the planting medium. I don't think I was the one who recommended bottom-feeding (I was never taught that), but two other staff members at the library do that and have amazing orchid success! They have really beautiful orchids that live for years and years. You may have gotten that tip from them?



Watering is a sensitive topic among lovers of orchids, and I try to be empathetic, if you will, with orchid owners, and even various florists. I am certainly no expert! Myself, I have never even owned an orchid; I've just worked with them professionally. Everyone means well, and the most unique things have worked for some keepers and growers of orchids that others would certainly frown on.

You explained to me a little that you are given **Amaryllis** from friends each year? Please tell us about your experience with Amaryllis, and why you love it.



A bright gift of Amaryllis

Caryn: Each year, it has become a tradition to receive **Amaryllis** plants from a friend as a holiday gift. The bulbs arrive planted in a decorative pot, from a reputable nursery. The process couldn't be easier: water once-a-week, place in a sunny window, and turn regularly to keep the stems from bending in one direction. If the stems get too tall, support them with dowels. And the results are incredibly showy, large flowers that bloom during the after-holiday gloom of January and February.



White Amaryllis in winter light

Sally: That is amazing dedication to the Amaryllis, Caryn. All of the care and knowledge—the feeling, and the willingness to keep learning—that you put into

your house plants is really incredible. And you have such a history of gardening. It's such a pleasure to talk with you about it.

Finally, are there any plants that you simply have had no luck with? Any that you would like to try that you haven't yet experienced?

Caryn: Orchids, orchids, orchids!



Caryn with Tango and Sherlock!



Caryn's kitchen window

Thank you, Caryn!

