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KEEP THE ASPIDISTRA FLYING!

(Or, Rhizome Is Their Business)

THE sugar ration is going up by two ounces per coupon per person per week (or per part of per week), the prodigal potato has returned, processed cheese is back in the shops again (adv't.), but Auckland hit the very norm of normality a few days ago when an enterprising seedsman announced the safe arrival in New Zealand of a shipment of aspidistras.

Housing being what it is, it seemed unlikely that there could be in Auckland enough front parlours to accommodate such a phalanx of greenery, so a *Listener* representative was sent post haste to find the facts. There was always the chance, of course, that one might uncover a profitable black market in dbr's, flats, or real estate.

Australia Grows Them Better

We found the seedsman busy at the back of the shop, surrounded by sacks of shiny kidney beans and companies of boxed seedlings, dressed off by the right and drawn up in hollow square formation.

"Where do you import your aspidistras from?" we began. We had always imagined that the aspidistra began and ended, in situ, in a pot of very earthy-smelling earth in Grandma's sitting room.

"It's a chap in Hastings who imports them and he gets them from Australia," said the seedsman, absently checking the dressing of a platoon of young petunias.

"Of course," he went on, "you can grow them here—some people do—but they seem to breed better over there. Climate suits them, I suppose."

"And do they sell?" we asked, determined to sacrifice even tact for fact.

"Sell? Why, of course they do—like hot cakes. It's mostly women buy them. No, not necessarily maiden aunts. Women of all ages. You can use them for front porches as well as front parlours, you know; they don't need much attention and they look tidy."

"You Can't Kill 'Em"

He led the way to another part of the shop entirely given over to aspidistras. There seemed to be hundreds of them, all sitting up primly in their pots like little green—well, like aspidistras.

"Look at that," he waved an arm, and one or two of the aspidistras waved back. "Not a yellow streak among them and they haven't been watered for a week. You can't kill 'em."

It was true enough. The earth in the pots was as flinty and impervious as the soil in our own backyard.

"But they do repay care and attention, don't they?" we persisted. "What about milk—that's used on the leaves, isn't it? You know, 'Don't forget to milk the aspidistra,' as Grandma used to say."

"Oh, but definitely. A little milk applied to the leaves with a soft cloth brings up the gloss wonderfully."

"What about castor oil? Can't that be used too?"

"Lord, no," the seedsman shuddered and a large aspidistra behind him began to curl at the ends. "Never use oil of any kind. It just collects dust and chokes the pores in the leaves."

Apparently, though you can't kill 'em, you have to be careful or your aspidistra will get aspiated.

Take One Rhizome

"And now, how about breeding them—can it be done decently in the home?"

"Quite easily," he explained. "Each leaf springs from a small rhizome, a sort of shoot, and you can divide the



"Among other possible uses . . ."

plants and pot each rhizome separately. It would take you about two years to grow an average-sized plant from one rhizome."

"And is it true that they flower occasionally?"

"Well, occasionally they do," he conceded, in much the same tone as the Astronomer Royal might use to describe the frequency of the Transit of Venus.

At this stage we noticed that a shapely young aspidistra near the end of the shelf was wiggling at us suggestively, so we beat a hasty retreat before we could be seduced into buying it.

* * *

WE did try to follow up the story, but must admit that we could discover no parallel boom in occasional tables, pints of milk, or canaries. But we did discover that the Auckland E.P.S. organisation is trying to get rid of several thousand surplus steel helmets. Among other possible uses to which these helmets might be put in the home, the E.P.S. suggests that they might be adapted as fern baskets.

We pass on the thought for what it is worth.

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