

Opinion **Gardens****Hello house plants: how we became a nation of indoor gardeners**

There is plenty of historical precedent for indoor growing but during lockdown sales have surged

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'Two Ladies Sitting on a Chest by a Cairo Ware Tray and a Vase of Flowers', by Hector Caffieri (1847-1932) © Bridgeman Images

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We are back on close terms with house plants. The last lockdown coincided with rivers of yellow daffodils outdoors, masses of magnolias and the loveliest spring weather ever in Britain. A mild autumn has left plenty of flowers in parks and gardens but the rain has played havoc with some and the rest may be denied to you by restrictions on free movement.

So it is back to the indoor ivies and rubber plants, pelargoniums with scented leaves and out-of-flower gardenias.

Until the narcissi start to flower indoors in early December, I have mixed results to my credit. All my effort has gone into gardening outdoors, from the first gentians to the last pink and red hesperanths.

My house plants of the moment are this summer's semi-hardy plants, sheltering indoors until I can find a greenhouse to house them for the winter. Heliotropes with violet-purple flowers, fuchsias and salvias on the borders of hardiness are keeping company with one of my worst buys at the start of the Covid crisis.

I love big double-flowered Angel's Trumpets, daturas as many still call them, though they are correctly brugmansias. Fearing that nurseries might close for good, I fell for three white-flowered brugmansias online for £10, only to find in August they were the feeble single-flowered variety. They are not half as lovely as the real doubles. They will be heading for the rubbish heap as soon as the last of their hanging trumpets has shut down.

My long-term stock on windowsills is less distinguished. It includes a pelargonium that is struggling, a pineapple flower whose leaves are correctly dying down and a few bits of white-flowered jasmine that need retraining. Deep down, I have even been letting the pelargonium struggle so that I can discover how tough it is.

At this year's aborted Chelsea Show there was to have been a new class of exhibit, House Plant Studios, in which designers would show how house plants can be used cleverly in any space indoors. I hope to see the entries next year as I need some lessons.

House plants have been the fastest-growing part of the UK plant market in the past 10 years. Edwardians called them "room plants" and perhaps we should revert to that name, as most of these house plants end up in apartments, not in houses at all.



Streptocarpus Constant Nymph

When did they begin to invade our indoor life? Will Brexit hit them? Which are my personal favourites for a rewarding but easy life? To answer the first question, I recommend Catherine Horwood's *Potted History*, just reissued in paperback by Pimpernel Press with updates. It is full of excellent detail and has taught me much.

Horwood begins her main story in 1608 with a book by the best-selling Hugh Plat, son of a brewer. He recommends sweet briar roses, bay trees, germander (teucrium) and, in summer, pots of rosemary in fireplaces dressed with moss.

Most of his suggestions are not so much house plants as plants that could be brought indoors for a few weeks. Others will not catch on in Kensington. He recommends climbing plants, including vines, which can be planted outdoors and allowed to creep in through half-open windows and then run all over the ceiling of a room indoors.

Even in the 1880s, the respected JC Loudon was suggesting that tiny garrets at the top of London houses could be used as mini greenhouses and that vigorous climbers could be trained out of their windows and up over the roof. If you have just re-emptied the attic, maybe you should try a white-flowered clematis armandii by the open window.

Long before Plat, did ancient Romans have house plants in the full sense of the term? Of course they grew bay trees, fruit trees, roses and so forth in courtyards in the centre of their houses, but did they reckon to have the same plants inside a room for most of a year? Certainly they loved garlands and cut flowers, but I cannot remember anyone growing, say, ivy as an all-the-year companion.

The early modern gardening craze changed the emphasis and began the indoor invasion. By 1700, Mary Somerset, Duchess of Beaufort, was growing masses of half-hardy plants indoors in her London mansion near the Chelsea Physic Garden. She was a superb gardener, closely interested in plants, but other Londoners had caught the habit too.

In 1722, in his *City Gardener*, Thomas Fairchild remarked on Londoners' "general love for gardening" and their furnishing their rooms with basins of flowers and also with blue-and-white china pots filled with them "rather than not have something of a garden before them." We are their heirs.

Might a crowd of indoor plants be dangerous? In answer to those who feared the "gas" they gave off, Florence Nightingale replied that in crowded rooms they "actually absorb carbonic acid and give off oxygen". Hospitals, banning flowers and pot plants, are at odds with nursing's founding sister and her prescient views on carbon capture.

During her long illness, she took great pleasure in her window boxes and contributed to a campaign to encourage the poor in London to grow window plants. The hope was that it would make them tidy up.

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Millennials have taken up the invitation. According to the Garden Centre Association, indoor plant sales rose by 14 per cent between 2017 and 2019. The British may be a nation of gardeners, but many of their indoor plants are bought in from abroad, especially from the Netherlands.

It has become a bit of a magic roundabout.

The Dutch grow the house plants that British indoor gardeners then kill or dump after flowering and reorder later, keeping the trade going.

Online suppliers such as Patch (patchplants.com) and Hortology (hortology.co.uk) have become first stops for indoor gardeners. Patch gives user-friendly names to its plants, avoiding botanical Latin which becomes very abstruse indoors. “Robin” is their name for a rubber plant.

What will happen to the trade after Brexit? My guess is that more paperwork and hassle over transport will put up prices. Will British suppliers try to undercut it? As Horwood reminds us, the famous British houseplant nursery, Rochford in Hertfordshire, stopped trading in the 1980s when foreign competition became overwhelming.

Flowering cyclamen are among the indoor plants still grown well by British specialists, but I doubt if Brexit will bring a new surge of local suppliers without subsidies to help them. Buyers will pay up and persist.

What are my favourites? *Pachira aquatica*, known as the money tree, may appeal to FT readers at £12.99 from Hortology, but, aptly, it is “temporarily unavailable”.

Leaving orchids to one side, I go for flowery *streptocarpus*, still a British success story. They flower for months in good colour combinations and since they were taken up by Dibleys nursery in Wales (info@dibley.com), their range has gone from strength to strength.

In 1946, *Streptocarpus Constant Nymph* was introduced by breeders at the John Innes Centre. Dibleys, the world leaders, now offer hundreds of options, as their yearly gold-winning exhibits at Chelsea testify. I have almost killed my pelargonium but even I have yet to kill a *streptocarpus* indoors.

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