

DON'T THEY LOVE ME?

JULIA DEAKIN
*bemoans her
unrequited love
affair with plants.*

If I could have plastic surgery I'd go for green fingers. I love plants. They don't seem to love me.

Why are women supposed to be "good with" house plants? Is it an extension of our maternal instincts? Are we supposed to identify with these decorous life forms?

Not many house plants are named after men. Black Eyed Susan, Mother-in-Law's Tongue, Flaming Katy... Yes, I do want to give them refuge. So why am I so hopeless with them?

Friends are always giving me plants. Sometimes the offering has so many flowers I think it must be plastic. No such luck. "It's a *pachystachys lutea*," they explain, delving for the only plastic bit — the little ID card under its luxuriant foliage. A *memento mori*, I think, for this tag bears not only instructions but a photo of the plant in its prime. Something to remember it by should anything...unfortunate happen.

Others go for overkill. They see my notorious husbandry skills as a challenge, rooting out the biggest, most monstrous *monstera* they can carry. As Birnam Wood comes up the path I fight off *déjà vu*. Any minute now I'll be told I can't go wrong with these.

"You can't go wrong with these. Anywhere, yes. They're not fussy. Not in a draught, of course. Keep it away from the door. By the window'll be fine, just make sure the frost doesn't get it. No, not near the gas fire, they don't like gas fires... that corner? Hmm — might be a bit dark..."

I see. This thing demands centre stage: nowhere less than the middle of the coffee table. Oh well, it should take quite a while for all those leaves to drop off. Meanwhile, who's to know I didn't personally rear the little monster from seed?

I study those instructions

religiously. "In winter do not over-water." But how do I know when I've over- or under-watered until the thing's dead, or not at all well? Come to that, how do I know when it's winter? Here it's spring or autumn most of the time. In spring I'm fooled with a false show of enthusiasm as my plants limber up on the window sill like delinquent triffids. By autumn there are more signs of life in the climbing sticks.

But before then I consult a friend. Any friend: they've all trained these hulking bits of the jungle to grace empty corners of their living room. To have an empty corner, I reflect, would be an achievement. (Could this be part of the problem?)

The friend is woefully unable to sympathise. "Really?" they muse from among the lianas. "But I never do anything with mine. No, honestly. I had a massive one before this which just grew and grew — so big — had to throw it out in the end..." Oh, to grow a plant so big I had to throw it out. What a rewarding hobby.

When pressed, however, I find their idea of doing nothing differs from mine. First they remind me I'm supposed to talk to plants. Now even I know this. But what do you say to the terminally ill? To a plant dying of thirst with a sheet of glass between it and weeks of rain? You can hardly talk about the weather.

You also, I discover, have to wash them. "WASH them?" I mock, sure that none of my friends submit to such thralldom. "Oh yes," they say casually. "Dust and sponge, every few weeks. Then about once a year just cover the soil with polythene, hold them upside down and swish them about in mild soapy water. I usually do mine in the bath."

To complete their toilette you can even gild your lilies with Leafshine. (This is easy, with only one leaf left.) And you're supposed to turn them, shake them, play music to them. No doubt they'd like a little nightclubbing too.

Yet when one trusts me enough to extend a tiny green hand, how should I encourage

it? Can I take a picture? Throw a party? Give it an extra sniffer of Baby Bio? Certainly not. Like a brisk nanny, I must "nip new shoots in the bud to encourage bushy growth". How could I be so cruel?

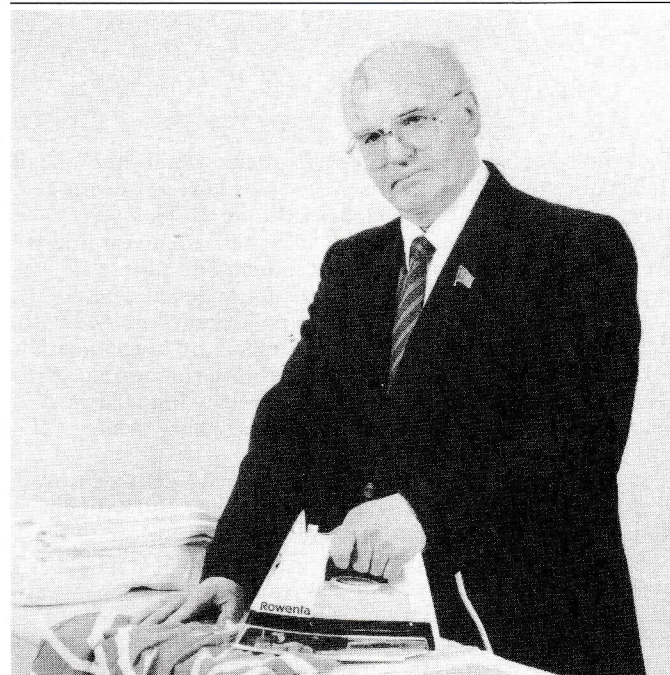
Finally (or is it firstly) you're supposed to "pot them on". On what? When? Well, not when they're in flower. 365 days for me to choose from, then.

Not that I give in easily. Only when the pot has stood on my window sill for six months, home to nothing but a stick, a tag and a shrivelled twig, do I admit defeat. "Must have over-watered you," I say in a final attempt at conversation, opening the back door, and with a practised flick of the wrist hurling the contents back to Mother Earth. Or "OK, maybe I haven't watered you since the last election." And yes, it would be more respectful to lay them to rest the right way up — but what's the point? Any road up, they're dead.

No. Let's keep this in perspective. Better just accept that plants and I don't get on. What I must not do is start believing that these failures are any reflection on my adequacy as a human being (perish the thought). Don't they like me? Does my conversation bore them? Is it the Laura Ashley wallpaper? Or the music? Was it the evening of Leonard Cohen that did for them? Only my collection of plastic tabs is growing. Perhaps I should arrange these pictorial headstones into a plant cemetery.

Perhaps not. Yet now and then I glance guiltily down at the burgeoning heap by the back door. And in February see to my amazement that the poor, bare, forked creatures I cast out in October have green shoots. Geraniums, miniature roses, saxifrage: risen from the dead and looking fit to run a marathon. Huge vivid leaves nod up at me as it to say: "Look. We can fend for ourselves. We're better off without you. The past is just a memory. Leave us alone."

Oh well. Mustn't take it personally. I quite like empty corners anyway.■



The things we lookalikes do for England... In this case it's for an ironing manufacturer which is hoping to supply Soviet "housewives" with irons "now the iron curtain has fallen". This follows a survey which revealed that only two out of three Soviet households have an electric iron, very few of them with steam. It seems they have to iron their underwear because it's made out of thicker fabrics. Could we suggest changing the fabrics to cut out the need for ironing altogether? That really *would* be progress: in the Soviet Union even more than here it's Raisa, not Mikhail, who wields the blunt instrument.