

Tale from the Garden!

If you came along to our Church Christmas Fair, you couldn't help but be impressed by the display of indoor plants on Christine's Plant Stall. One of those stood out for its size & froth of green leaves – the potted *Aspidistra* (very quickly snapped up by Ann for her grandson, Ben!). If you're just beginning your plant parenting journey, like Ben, there's no better starting point.

Everyone's maiden aunt & granny had one – it was once the Queen of the Parlour!

Potted plants have been a part of households for thousands of years. The ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans all kept houseplants in their sprawling estates. The Romans in particular, were fascinated with showy flowers and often decorated their homes with the largest and brightest variety of roses and violets. After the fall of the Roman empire, decorative gardening largely disappeared from Europe, and was replaced by a more utilitarian approach of growing herbs, vegetables, and fruits. Houseplants did not become fashionable again until the European Renaissance, when the wealthy and the affluent began to see them as a symbol of social status. Exotic varieties such as nasturtiums and sunflowers were shipped from the New World to Europe and gifted to monarchs. These delicate flowers required special environments similar to their native climes in order to bloom, that could only be created inside orangeries and glasshouses.

Those who couldn't afford a glasshouse and the army of servants needed to look after the plants often borrowed plants from nurseries when they had guests coming over for dinner. Others would send their potted plants to the nurseries for the winter where gardeners would take care of them for a fee. The most difficult times were the 1800s, when many Victorian homes began to have indoor lighting powered by gas. Gas lights produced toxic fumes that induced headache and nausea, blackened ceilings, discoloured curtains, corroded metals and left a layer of soot on every flat surface. Flowers and most houseplants wilted. Only two particularly hardy plants managed to survive the dismal environment of a Victorian home - the *Kentia* palm and the *Aspidistra*. These two plants, especially the *Aspidistra*, became a mainstay of every Victorian parlour, drawing room, lobby and upscale ballroom.

The *Aspidistra* became such a popular houseplant in Victorian Britain that it came to represent, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, "a symbol of full middle-class respectability".



Did you know?

George Orwell, in his satirical novel *'Keep the Aspidistra flying'*, published in 1936, used the *Aspidistra* as a symbol of the stuffiness of Victorian middle-class society. But Orwell was not the only one – or even the first – to lampoon the *Aspidistra*. Gracie Field's song *'The biggest aspidistra in the world'* didn't help either. In 1938 she sang of the *Aspidistra* "in the flower-pot on the whatnot near the 'atstand in the 'all' which had been there for years. This song in turn inspired the British Secret Service to name its 600-kilowatt transmitter, built during World War 2 to disrupt enemy communication, *Aspidistra*.

After the end of the First World War the poor plant became a music-hall joke, as "out of fashion as antimacassars, tall stained-glass bookcases and mutton-chop whiskers" (Yorkshire Post, 16 Feb 1954). For some its popularity waned, as it just didn't fit the new streamlined style of interior design and was replaced by rubber plants and cactus in the houseplant fashion parade. But for many ordinary people the *Aspidistra* remained popular, especially those who had had their plants for decades and decades. It

was clear from newspaper reports of the times that these plants were still lovingly cared for, divided up and shared around.

Aspidistra are sometimes known as the Cast Iron Plant because they're almost impossible to kill – they really do have a cast-iron constitution! They're practically bomb-proof! If you forget to water yours, or put it in a dark spot or just generally forget it exists for a bit, it will merrily make do on its own.

They've built up that tolerance for poor conditions by growing in the shade under larger trees in China and Vietnam. Their resilience has made them an extremely popular houseplant because anybody can care for one. If you really do struggle with keeping your house plants alive, aspidistra is the plant for you. They have been a favourite in British and American interiors for centuries. It is also referred to as the Bar-room plant for its ability to survive in smoky, dingy bars where it will be knocked about and neglected.

Aspidistra 'elatior' can tolerate a fair degree of neglect and is very low maintenance. To keep it looking its best, give it a bright spot, out of direct sunshine, and keep the compost just moist. It will appreciate the occasional liquid feed. Wipe the leaves with a damp cloth from time to time to keep the leaves dust-free and shiny.

The large paddle shaped leaves are often a dark shade of green and growing slowly it produces only a few new leaves a year. The main advantage of this is that it won't outgrow the location you choose for it, for a good many years. The disadvantage of growing so slowly means it does take a long time to grow to a saleable size, therefore Aspidistra's can be very expensive to buy. The cost, combined with some of the incorrect stereotypes that the plant is 'old fashioned' and "fussy" in modern homes means it can be quite difficult to get hold of.

However, it's worth searching for, for despite the stereotype it's actually a very forgiving and beautiful houseplant to grow. It will also live quite happily in many areas without too much effort from you. They also have incredible potential for longevity, with lots of anecdotal stories of peoples Aspidistra's reaching 50 years of age and beyond.

Maybe you'll join your maiden aunts and grannies and soon have your own aspidistra on "the whatnot near the 'atstand in the 'all."!!!!

The aspidistra's resilience has a lesson for us the Christmas time ...

Have you ever had a lonely Christmas? Has your Christmas meal ever been tinged with sadness? Has your economic situation ever negated your ability to even provide modest presents for those you love? Are you separated by oceans and continents from dear family and friends, especially in this Covid time? Maybe you are living with pain which makes it hard to appreciate the season or achieve the JOY you once felt. Perhaps you have been blessed to avoid such dynamics during your lifetime of Christmases, but I venture that most of us well understand such scenarios.

Ready or not - it is Christmas time - a time of peace and JOY for some, a time of loneliness and even depression for others. This holiday dynamic is part of the reality of our human journey. The Christmas story reflects the reality that this life is a mix of the good and the bad. The joy of the birth of Jesus, and the hope that his arrival brought, is mixed with the abject poverty into which he was born, the rejection experienced by his parents and the murder of the innocents at the hands of Herod. And, of course, what began in 'O little town of Bethlehem' continued to 'a green hill far away' where the baby whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, having grown up, suffered the horror of crucifixion.

Christmas affords us the opportunity to pause, consider, and celebrate God's provision of Jesus to free us from bondage, to give us the temporal and eternal gift of JOY – one of the fruits of His Holy Spirit (Read Galatians 5). James helps us understand the outcome of such Resilient Joy - "Consider it all JOY, my brethren when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith (even at Christmas) produces endurance, and let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." Let us march into Christmas with a Resilient JOY that is not based on circumstances, but on the truth of God's Word, the gift of Christ at Christmas, and the positive and healthy mindset that God can provide to each of us as we lean into Him.

I really do believe the message that those angels brought to the shepherds that first Christmas night, that the birth of the Saviour is good news **'for all the people'**. Indeed it is, perhaps, when life is at its hardest, when sadness and suffering are all around, that our need for Christmas and the hope it brings is most evident. Because Christmas really can cheer the broken-hearted, and rest merry even the most downcast. It is what keeps us resilient. Have a Blessed Joyful Christmas.