

**GESNERIAD GLEANINGS:
BACK TO BASICS
By Betty Tapping**

Received my first question! At least I know someone is reading the column! His request is for general cultural advice and tips for those who have never grown a gesneriad. So here we go! - "Back to Basics" for this column.

Most of this beautiful flowering family of plants may be easily grown by an amateur. They bring a marvellously wide range of colours to a home, some vibrant and bright, others subtle and demure, but all interesting and exciting. I wrote an article titled "KEEP IT SIMPLE" for the AVSA Beginner Column a number of years ago and that would still be my best advice for a first time grower of the other gesneriads. Basically our goal is to enjoy our plants without letting them take over our lives.

Acquiring plants - Choose your plants with care - if poor specimens are bought or acquired from friends, they seldom develop into strong and healthy plants. We may drive all over for new cuttings or plants - but please, please be sure you are dealing with a known supplier or a grower with a reputation for having disease and insect free plants. Resolve to buy only what you have space for - there are many small growing gesneriads for those with limited growing area. It's easy to lose sight of the fact that as plants mature, space requirements may be substantial. For instance, have you ever tried to untangle episcias or other gesneriads of trailing habit once they have grown in a mass (mess may be more descriptive). So let's give some thought to organizing your growing. First - it's a good idea to write the name on the pot as well as keeping the plant label in place. I have respect bordering on awe for those people who can and do remember the names of all their plants - but it is nice to know that if your memory is not so good you have a stake or tape to help you keep tabs of names.

Growing location - Gesneriads do very well in a greenhouse, naturally, but also have incredible potential for culture in our homes. Light is one of the primary ingredients required for good plant growth - so apply your thoughts to where and how this will be supplied. Plants may be grown conventionally in pots on the windowsill. Hanging containers are particularly good for the pendant or cascading gesneriads, and especially if the window is such that they are not getting direct sunlight during the hottest part of the day. Should there be no suitable window or all available space is filled you may wish to consider growing under fluorescent lights. Plant stands may be wood or metal, stationary or moveable, and I've seen some ingenious methods used to provide ample growing space. I have a mixture of the commercially available three tray stands with 4ft. 2-tube fluorescent fixtures and others made of industrial shelving that my patient husband wired to accommodate inexpensive shop lights. There are many choices when it comes to the actual tubes, cool white usually in combination with warm white or wider spectrum grow lights. As a general rule lights should be on about 12 hours to produce good growth - less than 12 hours you risk having a spindly growth pattern.

Temperature - Generally, if a fairly consistent temperature range of 18° - 27° C or 65°- 80°F (there are alpine gesneriads to which this would not apply) is maintained and you have good air circulation, your home environment should be ideal for gesneriads, as they adapt well to the low

light levels and warm temperatures of our homes. Try to keep humidity around your plants and cold draughts away from them. Plants from tropical and sub-tropical regions especially need a relatively humid atmosphere. Indeed, plants in general benefit from high humidity and a moderate temperature rather than low humidity and high temperature. You will find that if it is comfortable for us - so is it for most gesneriads. What better choice to beautify our homes than those plants of similar environmental likes and dislikes as ourselves!

Soil Mix - A touchy subject and a matter of lengthy discussion among growers - each having his own preference. A good quality African violet soil is fine. Enough to say that it should be a loose well drained medium containing materials like perlite or horticultural charcoal so that the mixture allows air to surround the roots. I grow many of the tuberous gesneriads in long fibre sphagnum moss for this same reason - it is light and airy! The pH (measure of acidity or alkalinity) should be in the range of 6.5 to 7.0 with the ideal probably being 6.8. Water may also be acid or alkaline. If you have been fertilizing and your plant still looks underfed check the pH. Plants can only access the fertilizer within a narrow range of pH.

Feeding - It's a fact that most plants will thrive with a fairly consistent regimen of care which includes a well-balanced fertilizer. There are many excellent products on the market in both liquid and soluble powders. We probably all have our favourites. If you have a preference for house plants and it is working well, don't change. Cultural changes in mature plants are just too noticeable. If you must try another grower's 'formula for success' do so on young plants and analyse the results continuously as they grow. Some growers like to rotate different fertilizers. I use 20-20-20 alternated with 12-36-14 (or 15-30-15) simply because that works well for me and everything gets the same treatment in the interest of time conservation. I prefer to use 1 ml to 4 litres (¼ teaspoon to a gallon) each time I water the plants - but if you are growing in your windows I would suggest using half that in the winter months as plant growth slows considerably in the somewhat reduced light hours.

Watering - Be it by mat, wick or individual watering, try to provide even moisture for your plants as they dislike both waterlogged and dried out conditions. More people kill plants by overwatering than by neglect - a good reason not to overpot gesneriads. The more soil you have the greater the risk of overwatering. Use room temperature water - never cold and do not allow leaves to become wet if you are growing in a sunny window - sun through the window will produce a brown scald on the leaves.

Pests and diseases - It's easy to be carried away here. We live in a scientific age - a marvel a minute, and with all kinds of problem-solving mixtures. Before you stock up on these wondrous products though, be sure you have a problem. Keeping an exploratory eagle eye on your plants they will let you know when all is not well. Learn to recognize symptoms and be aware of the appropriate remedy. Don't panic - from years of growing experience I can honestly say there are very few problems, providing you isolate new plants for a reasonable length of time before integrating into your collection. I find the simplest remedy may be to toss a plant out - and I don't hesitate to do just that when the need arises. The other choice is to use insecticides that are deemed safe for use in the home, such as insecticidal soap or some of the pyrethrum sprays which are safe for humans and animals (but not for birds or fish).

Grooming - This is an important task if plants are to look their best. Remove flowers as soon as they fade. If left, the dead flowers mar the plant and encourage others to decay. Also, by removing faded flowers, newly developing buds are encouraged to open. Remove dead leaves from plants and you may brush or wash healthy leaves if dirty.

Enjoy - Read all available material. The American Gloxinia and Gesneriad Society is a highly recommended source - as are local club libraries. Observe what good growers do. If you have a mind like a sieve as I do - never trust good information to memory - take notes. This marvellous hobby is a pleasant way to spend a few leisure hours and to add greenery and beauty to our homes - and also a source of new friends with like interests. If we get carried away, however, the same hobby can become quite intrusive, taking up more space than we initially intended and certainly a fairly high commitment of time. Remember my first suggestion - "KEEP IT SIMPLE" to enjoy your gesneriads.

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