UNUSUAL DECORATIONS

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THE state of Virginia must have one of the highest standards in the world for flower arranging of all kinds. Every garden club in the state holds contests for arrangements, spring flowers, buds, single species arrangements, dinner table centerpieces, special color effects, terraria and other long-term living arrangements, and, at this time of year, long-term dried arrangements, Christmas wreaths and decorations.

It is not my purpose here to try in any way to write a treatise on dried arrangements. I feel incompetent and humble in the face of a barrage of experts. However, there are some unusual plants which can be fun to use in the house in the winter time, and which dry naturally on the plant without any special treatment. I thought it might be of interest to point out a few.

The yam family, Dioscoreaceae, has only one genus in this part of the world, Dioscorea, divided up into about four species. D. quaternata is a partial vine, the stem being erect initially, then twining for the last few feet of its length. The lower leaves are in whorls of 4-7, further along the stem the leaves are opposite while the uppermost leaves are alternate. There are stamineate and pistillate flowers both of which are small and inconspicuous. It is the capsule containing the seeds which is the showy part of the plant. Oval, pendulous and three-sided, with each side extended into a slight flange, the capsules resemble miniature Japanese lanterns. They hang in rows along the upper part of the plant and remain on the stem after the seeds have been shed, drying out to form crisp, grayish-brown structures which are slightly translucent. Long strands of Dioscorea capsules can be brought into the house where they will last indefinitely and form an attractive addition to any winter arrangement.

One of my favorites amongst naturally dried plants is the teasel. Belonging to a small family, the Dipsacaceae, the teasel, Dipsacus, has a dense head of usually blue flowers at the end of a long, often prickly stalk. The name comes from the Greek word for thirst, dipsa, a reference to the water which collects in the "cup" formed by the united bases of the leaves in some species. Teasels frequent roadsides, old fields, pastures, stream banks and waste places. By the end of October, the flowers are over and the brown bristly heads of the teasels rise above the other vegetation. Teasels can be clipped and brought in just as they are to enhance indoor decorations. But any family of children who has not been subjected to a session of making "teasel mice" has missed a real treat. The stalk is cut off about half an inch from the head of the teasel and adorned with a blob of sealing wax to form the "nose" of the mouse. The long prickly pointed bracts of the involucre are removed and on either side of the stalk black-headed pins are inserted for the "eyes." The bristles of the teasel are trimmed, particularly severely on one side so that the mouse rests on a flat base. Ovals and a thin strip of felt or leather are then inserted with ordinary pins for "ears" and a "tail," and there is your "mouse!"

I still have the teasel mouse which a friend made with me when I was recovering from appendicitis at the age of 7, testimony to the lasting properties of these toys.

The grasses must not be neglected when there are such artistic ones as the bottle-brush grass around. Hystrix is a true grass (family Gramineae) and there is only one species in the eastern U.S., Hystrix patula. It is an impossible plant to press adequately because of its three dimensional nature, but it dries naturally on its stem and will last indefinitely indoors without any further treatment making an attractive addition to any winter bowl, or a nice arrangement just by itself.

Cotton-grass, Eriophorum virginicum, is not a grass; it is a sedge, family Cyperaceae. The sedges are an enormous and rather difficult family of monocotyledons, characteristically with triangular stems and many-flowered spikelets arranged in a dense terminal head or umbel. In all species of Eriophorum the bristles are very numerous, elongated and silky, varying in color from white, through cream-colored to tawny. The name Eriophorum comes from the Greek word for wool or cotton, erion, and phoros meaning bearing. Cotton-grass is found in mountain and coastal bogs and other damp acid places in the state. Like most sedges, it flowers in the late summer and fall and the "cotton balls" stay on the plant into the winter. If treated carefully, the sedge can be picked and kept in the house without losing any of its natural beauty.

This is only a tiny fraction of the plants which can be brought into the house in December and without any synthetic drying process. I hope they add a few unusual notes to some of the magnificent winter arrangements which bring the woods into so many Virginia homes. Have a Happy Christmas!