RARE REFERENCE
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Gardening

Adventurous wall-climbers

The common ornamental wall-climber, known to all garden lovers as the money-plant (Pothos scandens), has heart-shaped white or yellow marbled leaves. If the vine touches the trunk of a tree or any other hard surface, it throws out a series of adventitious roots, which make it appear like a centipede. These brown adventitious roots cling to the wall so firmly that it is difficult to peel them off from its support. While climbing, the plant becomes very large and in extreme cases, it reaches a length of two feet.

The common Philodendron is usually grown on a stump of sawdust-filled cork cylinder, and kept as an indoor plant. In some houses, this plant was allowed to climb on a shaded wall. The linear heart-shaped leaves can become as large as one and a half feet in size; the normal leaves, just six inches, can be used for flavouring iced drinks and ice-creams. The climbing vines formed on the internodes are similar to those of the money-plant.

A new type of artistic climber, which has recently come to notice, is Vanilla. This Mexican orchid, known botanically as Vanilla planifolia, was commercially exported in Madagascar, where it flowers luxuriously. The essence obtained from these pods and seeds formed the commercial vanilla essence used for flavouring iced drinks and ice-creams. It was also used in the manufacture of perfumes.

Fifty years ago, puddings and custards were flavoured all over the world including in India and Sri Lanka, by adding one or two of these fermented pods to them while cooking. Before serving, the pods were removed. Now readily available synthetic vanilla essence diminished the importance of the plant. Today it is only a variety of orchid, which can be grown all over India in shade.

This vine is normally allowed to trail easily on supports formed by wires. In a more relaxed manner, when grown adjacent to a wall with a hard surface, vanilla climbs in an artistically zig-zag fashion. Instead of the inter-nodes giving out a series of roots, only the elongated adventitious root found on the nodes adheres to the wall with the help of two tiny growths formed along the entire length of the root. It makes the adherence very strong.

Vanilla orchid showing its artistic zig-zag climbing pattern.

This discovery has made the wall climber an exquisite artistic plant. Vanilla is easily propagated by cuttings and when the nodes are buried in a pot filled with river sand, a handful of red soil and two handfuls of castor manure, it roots easily and also puts out new shoots. The pot has to be kept by the side of a wall on which this orchid is to be trained. Care must be taken to see that the growing vine touches the wall and is not forcibly attached to it. Within a month or two, the shoot reaches the height of three feet. So far this orchid has not flowered in Madras climate.

The adventitious roots of all the three tree-climbers are non-parasitic and once dislodged from their support will not cling again. Another point of caution is that these plants are not happy under direct sunlight and at a temperature above 90°F.

Philodendron - brown roots at the internodes looking like centipedes.

B. W. X. Ponnaiya