

# 'Personify your plants'

By LYNNE JARVIS

If "Mary" looks peaked today, maybe she needs a shot of para-dichlorobenzene. "Terry" may be too dry, and "Rod" may be just plain lonesome.

Jerry Baker, America's self-proclaimed "Master Gardener" and head of a Detroit-based research organization called the American Garden Institute, says personifying your houseplants by naming them and talking to them will insure their health and happiness.

"Talking to plants means you're going to take more time with them and better care of them, and that you'll see just what their needs are," he said.

A tallish, attractive man sporting a belly-green suit—his trademark of camaraderie with plants—the witty author of 18 books and one record album on the care of plants spoke at Hudson's Northland Wednesday promoting his latest book, "I Never Met a Houseplant I Didn't Like."

HE SAYS "the more plants the better" in your home because they'll help your complexion, your hair and the air you breathe to be their best. "Try putting some ferns in your bedroom—they'll probably improve your sex life," he grinned.

Some unusual plants that might help decorate your living room? Try cucumber, squash or watermelon for some lush greenery, and for the popular hanging basket try seeding bean plants. "They're some of the fastest growing plants you'll find," he said.

If the pretty flowering Impatiens plant is inaccessible, just cut the eye out of a potato and plant it some night. Not only will you see a delicate white flower that closely resembles Impatiens, you'll also get a half bushel of potatoes!

"The trick is to recreate normal living conditions for plants in your home," said Baker. "You've invited these plants, now make them feel welcome."

HE ESTABLISHED May 15 as the day upon which to base ideal plant conditions of temperature, light and humidity. "At that time the temperature is somewhere between 68-70° and daylight lasts 12-14 hours."

Humidity is the culprit mostly responsible for the success or failure of houseplants, said Baker. When you see the edges of leaves turning brown, it's time to do something about the humidity in your house.

Baker has a humidifier, but also advocates giving plants a healthy "shower" as often as twice a day. A quarter teaspoon biodegradable dish detergent in water both sprayed on the plant and into its soil removes "surface tension" and the oiliness left by smoke or grease.

FOR THOSE pesky bugs that sometimes appear on plants, grind up some chewing tobacco (yes, chewing tobacco) in water, add the detergent, spray and presto! "The bugs throw up, get diarrhea and never come back to that house again," laughed Baker.

Bugs in the soil will die off after a treatment of two paradichlorobenzene

moth balls and two teaspoons of moth crystals scattered in holes poked with knitting needles (one hole per 1 inch pot size). Spread some around lilac bushes to rid them of bugs, too.

Baker's rule of thumb on watering plants is just that—"Water deeply and thoroughly only when the soil feels dry to the touch."

Drinking water is "terrible" for plants, but Baker offers a way to purify it. Punch holes in the bottom of a plastic container, then fill with agricultural charcoal and egg shells. Run tap water through the mixture and catch it in a watering container. Add three drops of liquid dish soap at each watering of your plants and watch that white residue and crust on the soil and the pot disappear.

HE REFERS to the rose as "the queen" in several of his books and claims it's easy to distinguish the boys from the girls "without looking under their leaves." "The girls get pregnant with flowers, fruits and vegetables, and the rest the foliage, are usually boys." His favorite plant is the Fiddle Leaf Fig, "a hardy bachelor type," said Baker.

"African violets are pregnant all the time," and he considers African Violet plant food to be the best for most plants.

The "biggest boon" to gardening since nitrogen fertilizers is the birth control pill, said Baker. One pill to every three gallons of water "does great things to your plants because the hormone estrogen has such a positive effect on them. Just don't use it to water the vegetables your husband may eat," he warned the ladies in the audience.

FOR WOULD-BE gardeners, he had this advice —

•Plan your garden on paper first. Add the heights of each family member and multiply the total by 20. This gives the number of square feet of garden needed to feed that family for one year. For example, the total heights of a family of four equals 20 feet, multiplied by 20 feet gives them a garden size of 400 square feet.

•Fertilize the soil. Use, ideally, 50 pounds of peat moss, 50 pounds of manure, garden fluid, ashes and coffee grounds. Baker notes that compost piles in this area are illegal, but liquid compost is just as good.

•Plant when a handful of soil breaks open easily as your hand opens.

BAKER SUGGESTS planting sweet corn to the Western side of a garden as protection for the rest of the plants. "Most vegetables grow toward the east and do well with the protection of the corn plant."

He places lettuce and cabbage in rows next to the corn for maximum protection of these vegetables, and said vine-plants like strawberries or cucumbers should always be planted at the east end of the garden because that is the direction in which they will spread.

"Above all," he concluded, "practice the three P's—Pride, Persistence and Patience—to have really beautiful plants."



Jerry Baker is America's Master Gardener. (Staff photos by Harry Mautner)



And Baker autographed a book for Julie.

