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## FACTS, FIGURES on the PLASTIC FLOWER BOOM

By Vic Ball

SHOULD U.S. growers be concerned about the plastic flower boom? We think so!

Consider first that close to \$100 million worth of plastic blooms and plants (wholesale value) were sold in the U.S. during 1960. Not an official figure, but not far off in our opinion. Furthermore, plastic flower sales have been increasing very rapidly the past several years. Perhaps 20-35%. Accurate figures are scarce. Plastic flowers are not.

For comparison, the wholesale value of all *real* flowers and plants sold in the U.S. during 1959 (USDA Census) was about \$293 million. Plastic flowers are as of now, about 1/3 as big as real flowers in sales.

Many thoughtful people concerned with the business of growing and selling flowers and plants are getting uncomfortable about this rapid rise of "ersatz" flowers. We hear these questions:

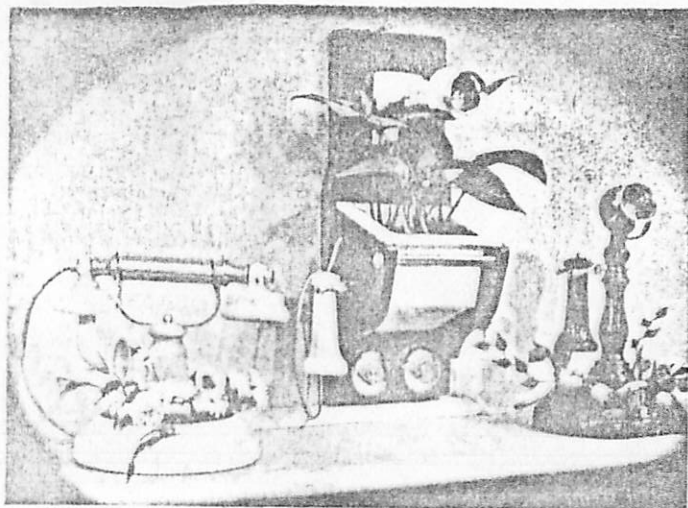
1. How much have dollar sales of *real* plants and flowers actually been reduced by these "artificial"?
2. What of the future? What will plastic flowers do to real flower sales in ten more years?
3. What can (and should) growers of real plants and flowers do to expand sale of their products—and to prevent "artificial" from making further inroads into their market?
4. Is the present rush for plastic flowers a boom—to be followed by a bust? Or are artificials here to stay?

### To Get Facts

We recently organized ten men into a special squad of interviewees. The ten people were from the Ball staff here at West Chicago. They were from our management group—buyers, department heads, plant breeders. All of them *know* the flower business.

We spot checked everyone concerned. Importers, wholesalers, retail florists, other (non-florist) outlets, even several dozen housewives were interviewed. Two of the fellows drew the

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All plastic!

assignment of "non-home" users—restaurants, hotels, stores, even bars!

Their mission: to dig for answers to the four questions above.

And—to get some background facts on what this plastic flower business is all about.

It would take many more people and more days to even approach a full story. But, as always, the survey did bring out certain basic facts.

First, here are in summary form the comments and findings from each of the interviewing teams—first, those who called on importers.

#### Importers' Comments

Plastic flowers are nearly all manufactured overseas. Hong Kong is probably the No. 1 source in quantity, Italy produces not so many flowers but the top quality. France and other European countries are also involved (Portugal, Greece, Switzerland). Perhaps about one-half of all U.S. imports are from Europe, one-half from the Orient.

Most "artificial" that are offered in U.S. stores come in through typical importers. Importers of course sell to wholesale distributors who in turn serve the florists, also food chains, drug stores, dime stores, gift shops, auto stores, and many others. American importers are principally working in New York and San Francisco—with some in Los Angeles.

One of the most interesting comments from a West Coast importer: "My guess is about 10% of total plastic flower sales are to florists."

Plastic foliage at work. Plastic has probably hit harder at foliage growers than any other area so far.



One major dime store chain does \$6 million a year alone.

One American firm made a strong try at manufacturing in the U.S., was forced out by the very cheap labor abroad. Petals, by the way, are molded, but assembly is all by hand.

There are said to be around 400 manufacturers in Hong Kong alone.

One importer reported a 50% increase in sales between '59 and '60. Importers comment on the rapid turnover of items in this field. The current big "kick" per one importer: Bougainvillea, Ming trees, nursery stock, evergreens.

"A red-hot, new item is often good for only 90 days."

#### The Wholesaler

From the importer, most of these plastics go to a variety of wholesalers and distributors—who in turn supply the retail florists and various other outlets. Comments from distributors:

"Foliage plants account for one-half of my business. Trend is away from larger flowers, such as Carnations. Miniatures such as baby Roses, Snapdragons, Forget-Me-Nots, go better."

"Any flower will sell best when the natural counterpart is in season." "Sales (for artificial flowers) have expanded rapidly for the past three years and I think will continue to for at least

another two years."

"My biggest sales are to the more progressive and aggressive shops who claim that the more artificial flowers they sell, the more fresh flowers they sell, as it brings more traffic into the store."

Jobbers and distributors sell flowers, not arrangements. Retail flower shops often sell flowers arranged as they can get a higher markup, thus not have to compete with dime store prices.

"Plastic flowers are an important part of the florist distributor's business."

"Five years ago we had only Japanese celluloid flowers, four years ago we got Japanese vinyl, three years ago the first polyethylene flowers from Italy (much better), two years ago crude polyethylene from Hong Kong, one year ago fine polyethylene flowers from Hong Kong at much lower prices than from Italy, France or Spain—and they are now considered the best buy."

"Our foliage comes mainly from Italy, Puerto Rico, and some domestic."

(A distributor): "I get the feeling that plastic flowers do not hurt the sale of fresh flowers or plants and definitely add to the income of the flower shop."

#### Artificials in Flower Shops

The next group of interviewers descended on several dozen retail flower shops—large and small, some retail growers, some pure retailers. Again, some interesting comments:

(Retailer): "We simply do not use plastic flowers in funerals. Furthermore, I don't know of any retailer who does." This was almost a universal comment. Some artificials are used for grave decorations especially at Memorial Day. Of course, most good artificial flowers would simply be several times more expensive for a funeral spray than would real ones—when you consider that it is strictly a one-time use.

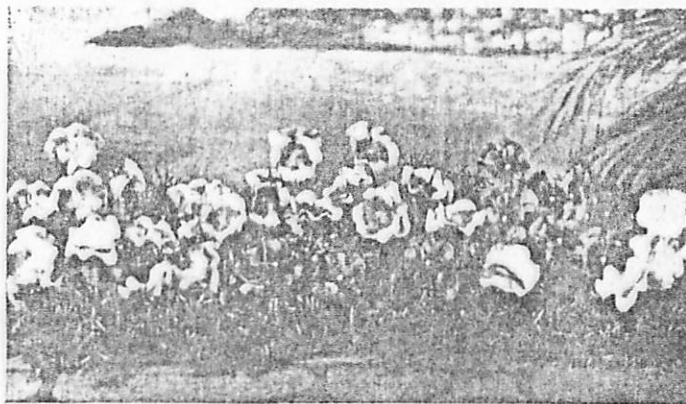
We should realize though that plastic flowers are getting better fast and will probably get cheaper as they are more widely used. There is no guarantee that, with clever promotion and lower prices, artificials could not become a part of the American funeral. A sobering thought!

"Some fancy architect is always locating a planter back in a dark corner where absolutely nothing can grow. The result is we simply have to put artificial foliage in such a place."

"I feel sure that the total effect of our handling plastic flowers is that we sell more fresh flowers."

(Interviewer): "All flower shops seemed to agree that plastic flowers were just a fad and that within a few years they would not be as prevalent as they are today. One florist mentioned that a public education program should be started to get people away from plastic flowers."

(Retailer): "Our long point in plastic flowers is that we can



"Ersatz" pansies.

make them into attractive designs better than the cheap outlets."

(Retailer): "Plastic flowers are used a lot by my customers as gifts. This is second only to their use for home decorations."

(Interviewer): "In every shop where I called, no advertising or telephone solicitation was done for plastic flowers." This was almost a universal comment of those who interviewed retail florists.

"Plastic foliage is a blessing for those of my customers who simply won't water and take care of real foliage."

(Interviewer): "All the shops where I called reported that their sale of plastic flowers and foliage was a very small part of their total sales—usually less than 5%."

(Retailer): "Three big uses people have for plastic flowers: first, foliage, that they put in home planters; second, plastic flowers used as centerpieces (so that if they are surprised by unexpected company there will be a little color around); third, Geraniums, Tulips, etc., used quite a bit as cemetery decoration."

"In general, good plastic flowers cost at least two or three times as much as their real counterpart."

"People like plastic flowers as gifts because they can be shipped or delivered so well."

#### Non-Florist Outlets Speak Up

Several more of our team went into department stores, dime stores, food stores, gift shops, etc.—any non-florist outlet for plastic flowers. Again, significant comments:

(Interviewer): "All stores were enthused over their increasing sales of plastic flowers and feel there is a big future in them. The dime stores and food stores get much better markup from artificials than from other products which they sell. Wood fibre corsages were a big item at one food chain. Marshall Fields in Chicago carry the highest quality Italian flowers and feel little competition from other stores with Portuguese or even less

expensive Hong Kong artificials. Fields get \$1.50 for one plastic Rose! Many of these outlets tied in sales on vases, bowls and pottery with plastic flowers."

(Interviewer): "Uniformly all these outlets considered plastic flowers an impulse item. The larger department stores feature them the year round. Food stores tended to offer plastic Jonquils in the spring, plastic Geraniums in May—whatever was in season."

(Large food store): "Over half of our plastic flowers are sold pre-arranged."

(Gift shop): "Many of our plastics are sold in arrangements. Our buyer does the arranging. Sales trend on artificials is definitely up."

(Chain dime store operator): "People seem to buy a lot of plastic flowers for grave decoration. They want color there but are too far from the cemetery to take care of fresh flowers or plants. We look for a real increase in plastic flowers in the future."

"Most of our sales are not arranged. If we had time to arrange them we would sell more."

(Dime store manager): "Main reasons people buy plastic flowers are, first, for home arrangements; second, decorate graves at the cemetery; and third, to dress up an inexpensive gift of pottery or a vase."

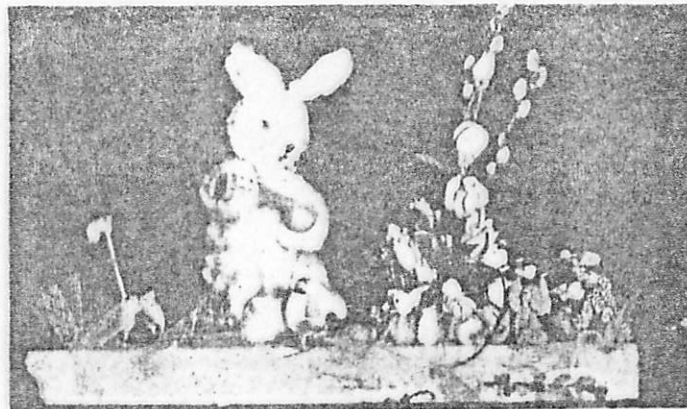
(Our interviewer at Marshall Fields in Chicago): "About half of Field's sales were arranged, half not. Roughly one-quarter of their sales was foliage, three-quarters were flowers. Sales were very good. They often have a designer right on the floor along with the flowers—he will take the container you buy and the flowers you buy and make them up for you right on the spot. Fields have done some strong advertising to push their plastic flowers. The latest new thing here is tuberous Begonias—a large flower along with several leaves. Looks very real."

(From the Marshall Fields ad for plastic flowers): "Bursting in the spring scene. Looking as if your florist had just delivered them are these lovely plastic flower arrangements by Corbosco. Add flower colors to your rooms for spring, on mantels, tables, and as centerpieces with candles matching. A nice Valentine idea, too." The ad features arrangements from \$1 to \$10 each.

### Now the Housewife

We reasoned that since decorating the home—and gifts—were the two principal uses of artificials, comments from the housewife might furnish more light on the subject. So, here we go:

(Interviewer): "Housewives that I talked to liked plastic flowers because of the minimum care. No watering or change of water. No muss, no dropped leaves or petals. Plastic plants can be used in inside areas that do not have enough light for



Easter design—with plastic roses. A recent design clinic of a major trade group featured one entire session on use of plastic flowers.

live plants—and will keep looking good for a long time.

"Their objections seemed to be the lack of fragrance and freshness, fading with age, and lastly high cost of some of the better plastics. Most of those I talked with felt that if budget priced fresh plants and cut flowers were more available either in supermarkets or some other high traffic areas, they would use more of them.

"Most seemed to not object to the cost of real bedding plants for their yards because they get summer-long beauty. The same money spent for a centerpiece indoors will last only a few days.

"In no case did anyone say they bought less fresh flowers because of plastics."

(Interviewer): "All the women I talked to wanted real flowers for holidays, birthdays, Mother's Day—would not think of using plastic flowers for these occasions."

(Interviewer): "Everyone I talked to would always prefer real flowers to artificial."

(Housewife): "I just don't like to have plastic flowers in window boxes or flower beds. I'd much rather have real ones—and they aren't expensive, so I do."

(Interviewer): "We have simply not established a tradition of keeping fresh cut flowers in the home in our country. This was brought out by a Hungarian lady I interviewed: 'Life is simply not worthwhile if you can't have a few real flowers around the house.'"

(Interviewer): "Plastic flowers are simply not competitive with the bedding plant trade. People I talked to uniformly wanted real flowers in their window boxes and flower beds."

(Another interviewer): "Housewives I talked to in the middle- and upper-income brackets would surely buy more real flowers if they were available at lower prices. The medium-to low-

income families would probably buy few real flowers even under these circumstances."

(Interviewer): "After talking to six housewives it seems to me plastic flowers and real ones are not competitive really. Artificials are in a different class—more like pictures on the wall—or in the class of the plastic fruit which you often see—purely for decoration."

(Interviewer): "By far the big use that housewives made of plastic flowers was simply to decorate their home. This must be many times over the volume resulting from such things as gift use, cemetery planting, etc. All six homes I called on used plastic flowers for home decoration—none of them for other purposes."

(Housewife): "Certainly plastic flowers are not more stylish than real ones. Anyone would rather have real flowers."

(Housewife): "No, I surely don't like plastic blooms in my window box. They look like a cemetery!"

(Housewife): "Sure, I'd buy more flowers if they were cheaper and more convenient. ——— Flower Shop is the only place I know where I can go in and ask for a bunch and get something for \$1.50—even seconds. I don't care if they are seconds as long as they are real!"

(Housewife): "I think plastic flowers will never take the place of real ones. However, I use them because they are reusable and thus economical over a long period of time. Plastic flowers could never replace the real thing."

#### Lastly, Business Users

These fellows called on banks, retail stores, hotels, bars, etc., where plastic (or real) flowers and plants were displayed.

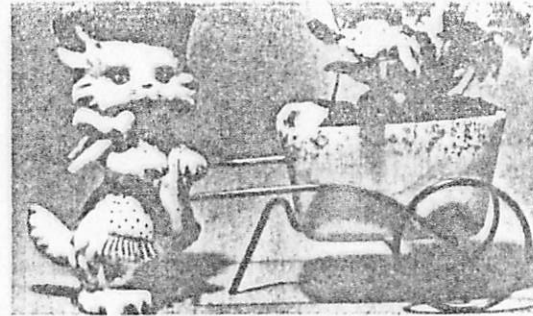
(Country club manager): "We have turned largely to use of artificial foliage here. Real plants take too much care and watering, keeping leaves clean, trimming dead foliage, etc. Things just don't grow in the dark interior of our club."

(Manager of high grade jewelry store in Chicago): "We have to use plastic flowers in our window decorations because it's too hot and sunny. However, we are using live foliage inside our store and they seem to do well because of the fair amount of light. I feel the real foliage plants give our establishment much more prestige. This is important here—our jewelry is real, so our plants certainly should be, too. Furthermore, I think the live foliage is cheaper in the long run."

(Large television store in Chicago): "We use nothing but live foliage plants and they are doing exceptionally well. We have a fairly light interior in our store plus a lot of artificial light which helps. Some of our plants have been here for several years. We feel the live plants give our store much more prestige and appeal than plastic ever could."

(Retail radiator outlet in Chicago): "As you can see, our whole store is freely decorated with artificial foliage. There's been

Here's how a few plastic primula stems can dress up a bit of pottery.



some problem with keeping them clean from dust and the display is probably now obsolete. However, with the poor light we have it seems like plastics are the best bet for us."

(Interviewer): "Also called on a high grade furniture outlet and a top Loop hotel. Both used real plants for their decorations—both commented that the general prestige was an important factor even though they require replacing occasionally due to low light in certain areas. Incidentally, the Chicago Art Institute was quite well decorated with real live plants."

"I came away from my calls with the definite feeling that those concerned who are on a high prestige level certainly consider live plants and flowers where they can possibly be used as a distinct prestige advantage."

"As would be expected, night spots, restaurants, clubs, etc., that are very dimly lighted are obliged to use artificial flowers and plants."

"Probably the majority of these industrial type users of foliage are using artificial plants. However, there are still a substantial number of live specimens seen in the better places."

#### Our Conclusions

Can best be summed up by answering the four questions posed at the start:

##### 1. How much have artificials cut real flower sales?

The \$64 question!

The conclusions we drew were, in a way, an incongruity.

Almost without exception, wholesalers, retail florists, housewives etc., insisted that "artificials" had not and would not reduce the sale of real flowers.

(Housewife): "I don't think they replace flowers in any home, but are just a *supplement*. I don't think housewives use fewer real flowers because plastics are on the market. I wouldn't even put them in the same category. To me they are more of an ornament—like a vase. Very seasonal."

(Interviewer): "The use of plastic flowers in the home has not affected the amount of real flower purchases. The housewife looked upon fresh flowers as something of a special occasion, while plastic flowers were regarded much as a piece



Plastic is even used (in place of real flowers) to sell other products.

of furniture—more or less permanent.”

Retail florists uniformly insisted that, if anything, artificials increased their sale of real flowers.

(Retail florist interviewers): “Plastic flowers seem to increase sale of real flowers—due probably to a more acute awareness of flowers. Most retailers felt that plastic flower purchasers were originally people who bought few real flowers.”

(Retailer): “Plastic flowers bring more people into my store. More traffic, more sale of real flowers. I have to carry them.” But, now the incongruity in all this.

It came out mainly during the housewife interviews.

Somehow you get the definite feeling that the strong demand for plastic flowers reflects a hunger for real flowers—which most people simply cannot afford. Tacitly this says that if we as an industry could make real flowers conveniently available at lower prices, housewives would be delighted to buy them—and buy fewer plastics. They love real flowers.

Because they are *alive!*

(Housewife interviewer): “The answer from 7 out of 9 whom I talked with was that if they could afford it, they would have fresh flowers every week, and this would automatically cut down the use of plastic flowers.”

Partly at least, people bought \$100 million of artificials because real flowers were too expensive on an every week basis—and hard to buy.

We asked housewives: would you buy real flowers regularly if you could buy even a small bunch for under \$1 or \$1.50—

Looks real—but it's the skilled hand of the plastic flower maker at work again.

conveniently along with your weekly shopping. Most said yes.

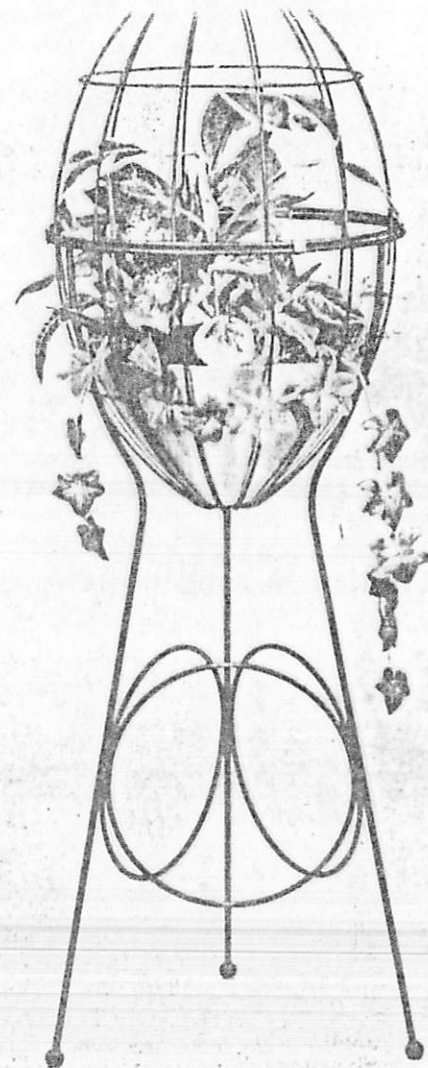
Conclusion on question #1 (our opinion): Plastic flowers are cutting into the sale of real flowers especially for home use. More accurately, we *should* say: people want more flowers in their homes. They are turning to artificials because they are cheaper in the long run. It would seem that this trend toward plastics could be reversed if effective low markup cash and carry outlets for real blooms could be developed.

Perhaps the reason Europe has not gone on this plastic flower binge is simply because they *have* established cash and carry outlets for real flowers and because the people have come to accept fresh flowers as part of their every day life. The German worker can buy a few real flowers on his way home Friday night—for 98c.

Perhaps plastic flowers will finally *force* U.S. growers to set up more of this type distribution.

People don't want plastics. They want *real* flowers!

It should be added here that some part of the present plastic flower volume is here to stay. They *do* fill certain needs which



real flowers and plants simply cannot. This was brought out in the preceding pages. However, some part of the present \$100 million of artificials could be replaced by effectively offered budget flowers—in our opinion. Whether this "part" is half, more, or less, we don't know.

2. *What are the ten year prospects for artificials?*

Those concerned with plastic flowers, especially the non-florist outlets, were uniformly optimistic about the future. It's booming and they expect it to continue. Quality and realism of plastic blooms is improving startlingly.

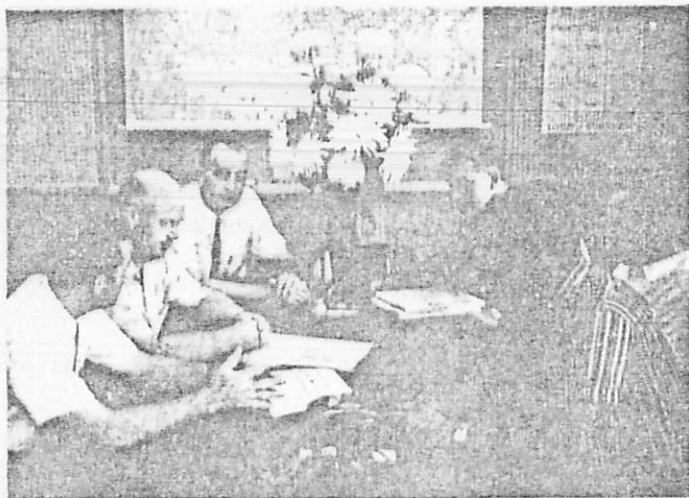
It would seem that the future balance between plastic and real flowers would depend greatly on how effectively real flower men can develop lower price merchandising.

3. *What can flower growers do to win the market away from plastic blooms?*

We don't pose as experts on developing cash and carry outlets for fresh flowers. It does seem, though, that it is more a matter of setting up distribution channels. The fact that the U. S. has gone on such a plastic flower spree without any big major promotion makes one realize that the demand for flowers is there.

4. *Are "artificials" here to stay? Or is it just a boom?*

Many people we talked with who know the retail flower business feel that this is something of a "fad" we are going through. However, artificials have been with us for a long time. Sales today are big. It would seem folly to assume that the fad will soon be over.



Here's part of the group that did the plastic flower interviewing. From the left: Earl Hester, John Holden, Phil Jones, Darrell Messick, Ed Harthun, and Larry Rerko. Not present in the photo but also took part were: Bob Rieman, Jack Klme, M. C. Wright, and Arvilla Kerst. All members of the Ball staff.

## AUGUST NOTES

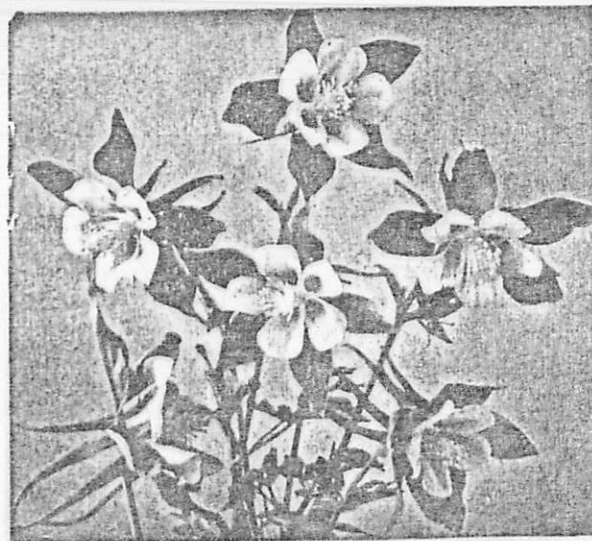
Phil Jones

### DON'T OVERLOOK PERENNIALS

The writer was fortunate in being able to spend a week last May in the Detroit, Milwaukee and Indianapolis areas calling on bedding plant growers and retailers during the height of the bedding plant season. During the course of these visits, one revealing and pertinent point was made clear. More Perennials are being sold along with Bedding Annuals each spring.

Quite apparently there is a widespread re-awakening interest in Perennials among home owners. Today's plant buyers are predominately a different generation from those who bought plants 20 or 30 years ago, and who had come to look upon Perennials as "old-fashioned" and a hold-over from horse and buggy days. To this modern group of home owners, Perennials are either something new and exciting, or they have a nostalgic appeal that, in itself, is becoming more and more popular.

At any rate, the demand for well grown Perennial plants is definitely on the upswing, and alert bedding plant growers are taking advantage of it, and promoting it. One thing is different however—the manner of handling these plants. Not many are offered as cumbersome field grown clumps. Instead, today's grower handles them much like annuals in Paks or in 3 inch Jiffy-Pots. A mid-August sowing permits enough time to get container-grown plants established sufficiently to go into frames by late fall. Jiffy-Potted plants are often plunged into soil in frames or open beds which enables them to maintain a good soil ball when dug in spring. Paks are placed directly on a sheet



Aquilegias (or Columbines as they are more popularly called) have wide appeal to many modern home owners. See accompanying story on today's new Perennial market.