

LIVING KNICKKNACKS

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Living Knickknacks are new to American floriculture. The American consumer may be ready to accept the idea of a small flowering pot plant which I am calling a Living Knickknack. Here are three reasons. In Europe three and four inch flowering pot plants have been and continue to be popular. As the American taste for floricultural products matures, it will probably follow the European influence, and Americans will buy Living Knickknacks. This past summer four inch foliage plants sold well indicating that the American consumer is ready to purchase small size plants. Finally, the "instant color" annuals sold in flower in small pots are an important flowering item in June and July.

According to the dictionary a knickknack is defined as "a small article for ornament rather than use." Thus a Living Knickknack is a small living ornamental object, which seems to describe a small flowering pot plant.

A Living Knickknack would have several characteristics:

1. The plants will generally be grown in three to four inch pots. If the plants are grown in any larger size pots, they are nothing new. If the pot size and plant are too small, they will not add much decorative value to the room.

2. The height of the plant must be in proportion to the size of the pot. As a general guideline the height of the plant should be no

more than twice the height of the pot. For example, a three inch pot is three inches tall, thus the plant should be no more than six inches tall and five inches might be even better. This may mean the precise use of growth retardants to control the height.

3. Showy flowers and colorful foliage are beautiful and add a great deal of ornamental value to any setting. Rex begonias, for example, are very colorful and might make nice Living Knickknacks but flowering plants should predominate in an ongoing product mix.



4. Living Knickknacks must have good keeping quality. The plant in a small pot must last as long as the same plant in a larger pot. New species must be tested to see that they have good keeping quality.

5. All plants that are in the program must be of top quality. It will not work for long to take a poor, sick plant that has been growing in a five inch pot, repot it to a four inch and call that a Living Knickknack. When the consumer realizes that the quality of the small plants is as good as the large ones, then he or she will be encouraged to buy additional plants.

6. It is absolutely essential to have a variety of plants. The idea of Living Knickknacks is to buy these plants as an impulse item on a regular basis. How many pot mums is one person going to buy before they are looking for something different? For example, yellow pot mums might be featured for this week, white daisies next week, followed by orange kalanchoes, then blue African violets and so on.



This defines Living Knickknacks. Here are the advantages.

1. Living Knickknacks fit into almost any location in the home such as a night table, bureau, coffee table, plant stand and even as a dining room table centerpiece.

2. Since the pot size is small, Living Knickknacks are also convenient to carry.

3. These small plants can be priced as an impulse item. How much is the average consumer willing to spend on impulse to purchase a plant to decorate a table? Most would not spend the \$5.00 to \$10.00 for five to six inch potted plants. More would be inclined to spend between \$1.98 and \$2.98 for a Living Knickknack to decorate the livingroom coffee table. Since these would be priced as an impulse item, the retailer would have a year-round saleable item.

4. The Living Knickknack also has the potential of providing a good return to the grower. In the following table hypothetical data has been calculated for a pot mum crop.

Pot Size	Pots/ Sq.Ft.	Cut-tings	Price/ Pot	\$/Sq. Ft.	Cut-ting Cost	Pot Cost	Income per Sq. Ft.
4"	3.6	1	\$1.25	\$4.50	0.36	0.20	\$3.94
5 1/2"	1.0	3	3.75	3.75	0.30	0.09	3.36
6"	0.7	4	4.50	3.15	0.28	0.07	2.80

Each grower will have to calculate his own income, but these figures indicate that there is a great deal of potential to increase income by going to a small pot size, which means Living Knickknacks. Here are some disadvantages:

1. Smaller pots require more frequent watering and can add significant additional labor to the crop. A method of circumventing

that problem is growing the plants on capillary mats. It may be possible to have capillary mats in retail sales areas. In the description of the technique to follow, the use of the capillary mat will be assumed.

2. Smaller pots will mean more handling and increased labor costs unless the units that are moved contain more than one pot. A type of tray will be described in which twelve 3" pots will be moved at one time which will conserve labor.

3. More plants per square foot means a higher initial cost for cuttings or seedlings. This cost can't be reduced but additional income will more than cover it.



There are several methods for growing Living Knickknacks. One method will be described. Grow on capillary mats with automatic trickle irrigation. To increase the flexibility and efficiency of this production program, a mist system can be set up for starting crops. Independent controls are necessary. It would be beneficial to provide the option of fertilizing through the mist system.

A bench set up in this manner will provide great versatility in the crops that will be grown, such as poinsettias, kalanchoe and African violets.

A tray is available for capillary mat watering that is about 18" x 12" and designed to hold 24 3" pots. The pots can be spaced in every other spot so that 12 pots are held on a 3" x 6" spacing. This spacing works well on pot mums since the cuttings can be directly stuck into the pots at this spacing. The pots are always handled 12 at a time. The pots are supported at the top, and the bottom of the pot is in direct contact with the capillary mat. A slow release fertilizer in the root medium will reduce algal growth on the mat. Osmocote 14-14-14 can be added at 13 lbs. per cu. yd.

Since the plants are being grown in small pots, an extra application of a growth retardant may be needed to control height. Variety selection is also important, since some varieties easily adapt to small pots while others do not.

In conclusion, the Living Knickknack will be an important item for the future. It is more versatile for home decoration and closer to the budget for the average consumer. It may also be more profitable for the grower particularly if automated with a watering system, flexible benching system and system of moving units of pots.

Adapted from an address presented at the 1979 Connecticut Greenhouse Short Course.