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THE LIVE PLANT DISPLAY IN THE ULSTER MUSEUM

For some years now the Botany section of the Ulster Museum has maintained a live plant display in the Museum's entrance hall. It was felt that the display might well inject some life into the section's permanent exhibits, which, however ingenious, use photographs, models and preserved specimens; that it would also show members of the public something of the wide variety in the plant kingdom was considered an advantage.

The display consists mainly of bromeliads and ferns - which have proved to be the most suited (or most resistant) to the prevailing atmosphere in the entrance hall, which is excessively dry, very hot and very dark.

The plant pots are plunged in a peat bed, which, liberally watered, provides much needed humidity, and Vita-lite fluorescent tubes give lighting of a reasonable intensity without much heat.

Members of the Bromeliaceae were chosen for their tolerance of such conditions. They are a highly evolved group, the majority having inflorescences of great complexity and beauty, occasionally scented and nearly always brightly coloured; many species also have strikingly patterned leaves. Leaves form rosettes, with the inflorescence usually rising from the centre. Dimensions within the family vary widely - in height from a few inches to 30 feet, in width again from a few inches to 4-6 feet. The tallest specimens displayed so far have been about 5 feet high.

The ferns exhibited are mostly sub-tropical species. They provide a lush green background ideal for setting off the bromeliads, but are beautiful in their own right, displaying great variety in habit, leaf colour and texture, and in the range of colour, shape and patterning of sori.

About 40 plants are on view at any one time. All have labels giving the correct botanical name, any commonly used English names, the plant family and the geographical distribution of the species.

Plants are grown on the roof of the Museum in a glasshouse and a cooler wooden shed. These have been fitted, as far as possible, with automated equipment - automatic vents and lighting, thermostatically controlled heating and fans; and a new watering system using capillary matting has been developed which requires no maintenance and is simple to operate. It can also be used to apply insecticides, fungicides and algae inhibitors. Use of these systems has cut running time to a minimum.

The plants are repotted and divided every spring, using mixtures best suited to their requirements. After initial purchases to establish the display, most new plants are acquired by vegetative propagation - usually division and removal of offsets. Some new specimens have also been acquired by exchange with institutions such as botanic gardens and agricultural colleges.

Since the plant table display started in 1974, there has been a great deal of interest shown in it by the public, and an increase in the number of enquiries about cultivated plants from both the public and members of staff.