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There are many folks out there who struggle growing houseplants, while others have trouble keeping their plants from taking over the house. But for both novice and expert, there is a family of plants that pretty much takes care of themselves, and can be a beauty in the interior landscape. Commonly called such unappealing names as Mother-in-law's tongue or snake plant, the family of sansevieria has some fabulous choices.

Sansevieria is a plant that is almost impossible to kill. In fact, if you can't grow a sansevieria, you may need some serious plant help! These plants have been around for years and seem to come and go in popularity. This member of the agave family is native to Africa and the East Indies. The plants grow in height from small dish garden plants to four feet in height. They grow from a rhizome—or fleshy root, similar to an iris plant. The leaves are sword shaped and smooth, thick and fleshy, and depending on variety, come in a multitude of variegated and solid leaf patterns. The thick, fleshy leaves are a sure sign that this plant doesn't need a lot of water. In fact, these plants will take about any abuse you throw at them, other than too much water.

While there are more than 60 species of this plant, there aren't quite that many choices in local outlets. 'Hahnii' or 'Golden Hahnii' are great small choices, and are commonly called the Bird's Nest sansevieria for their short rosettes of foliage. 'Laurentii' is the standard strap-like foliage, growing up to four feet in height. Common sansevieria are usually available at all plant outlets, but if you really want to grow some of the obscure forms, you may need to order via mail order or the internet. The common ones may be common, but they may still be a new plant for your home, so start with what you can find.

Interesting enough, the leaves of sansevieria contain tough elastic fibers which were used by the ancient Hindus in making bowstrings, giving them another older common name –Bowstring hemp. Mats and ropes were also made from the fibers.

Sansevieria will grow in bright light, but seem to do fine in relatively low light conditions as well. They don't appear to be growing very much, yet they can fill up a pot without your knowing it. These plants are easily propagated by division or by leaf segments. Simply cut a leaf into one to two inch sections and set these in a sandy soil mix, making sure to keep them oriented the same way they were growing(—since they won't grow if you plant them upside down.) To keep humidity high during this process, you can put the pot and cuttings inside a clear plastic bag. In time, young plants will form at the base of these cuttings. Leaf cuttings of Sansevieria take a long time to "root" because they actually do not. What happens, is they form a rhizome from that cutting, and from that, a new leaf emerges, with the old leaf eventually disintegrating. Keep them in small pots to begin with, gradually increasing pot size. One tip to keep in mind, if you are propagating a variegated form, and want to keep variegation you must propagate by division, not leaf cuttings. Leaf segments produce green leafed plants, since the variegation is a chimera—or a type of mutation.

While many houseplants have the capability of blooming, few actually do in the low light conditions which occur indoors. Sansevieria are plants that may bloom indoors. Plants usually need fairly good growing conditions to bloom, but if pot bound, and old enough—usually 5- 7 years, they can produce a thin spike of white flowers. Some like the sweet fragrance, while others find them a bit cloying. The flowers probably add more in fragrance than showy beauty, since they are relatively small. If your plant has never bloomed, don't despair, keep in mind, we are growing this plant for its tough durability and attractive foliage, not for the flowers.

These plants make an interesting addition to the outdoor landscape in the spring and summer, but must be brought indoors each fall. Repot as needed when they get pot-bound. Make sure you don't increase the pot size too much. All containers should have a drainage hole to avoid overwatering.

Sansevieria is a great family of plants to start with if you are new to gardening. They thrive on benign neglect, and are a great way to build up your gardening confidence. Grow these for a year or two, and then branch out with other houseplants. Before you know it, a greenhouse addition may be needed for all your excess greenery.

