The very ancient and well-known foliage represented on Corinthian capitals is said to be modeled after the leaves of Acanthus spinosus and sometimes Acanthus mollis to vary the pattern. These were probably not the only plants used in this conventional design. It is possible that all plants of a thorny, spiny, or thistle-like nature and of similar appearance and growth were referred to as akanthos by the Greeks, the word akantha meaning thorn, thistle, or spine. Of some of the stylized ornaments it is rather difficult to say whether they were fashioned after one of the thistles, the Acanthus spinosus and mollis, or were just imaginary designs. Many thistle-like plants, for instance certain species of silybum, carduus, and cirsium, the genus Acanthus includes about twenty species, most of which are native in southern France, Spain, Italy, and other parts of the Mediterranean region. A few inhabit Australia and Africa. The two acanthuses in question have been found to grow in the most diverse places. Some botanists have discovered them in moist semi-shady woodlands, others on the banks of watercourses, along roadsides, and in crevices of rocks, which seems to suggest either that they could be grown almost anywhere, or that they were not all the true acanthus. Dioscorides says: “They grow in gardens, and in rocky, and in moist places.”

There are several versions of the legend of how the Corinthian capitals originated. One relates that Callimachus, a famous Athenian architect and sculptor of the fifth century B.C., had been engaged to make some pillars at Corinth. One day, in passing, he came upon a basket, covered with a large tile, that had been placed on the ground over an acanthus root. The leaves of the acanthus had grown out from under the basket, spreading themselves on the outside, and were bent back at the top by the corners of the tile. The elegance of the combination so delighted Callimachus that he immediately adopted the form of the basket surrounded with acanthus leaves for the capitals of his pillars. In another tale, the acanthus on the Corinthian capitals has been immortalized in this manner: A little girl of Corinth died and was buried in a spot where the acanthus grew. Her old nurse carried a basket of her toys to the grave and placed it on one of the plants. When the young leaves...
came up they were bent by the burden into a curve, gracefully framing the basket. Callimachus, passing the place, was so charmed by the lines that he perpetuated them in stone.

In the History of Garden Art by Marie Louise Gotheim it is mentioned that Pliny, in one of his letters describing the garden around his Villa Tusci, states that terraces were planted solid with soft-leaved acanthus. These were presumably the Acanthus mollis, *mollis* meaning soft and without thorns. Terraces in those days apparently were not meant to be used as places for recreation and rest. It is not conceivable that anyone would have lounged in a bed of acanthus, as the plants are very succulent and full of a mucilaginous juice. The roots are thick and fleshy and, like the leaves, contain a slimy, sticky substance. Both roots and leaves were used in mediaeval times to cure all sorts of intestinal ailments, for catarrh and for spitting blood, and externally for skin irritations, itches, burns, and various skin diseases. The leaves of Acanthus mollis, being particularly emollient, were applied in poultices and also used as a remedy against the sting of the tarantula.

The true Acanthus spinosus and the Acanthus mollis seem not to be available in this country but, for all we know, may be thriving obscurely in private collections or botanical gardens. Unfortunately, the plants we have growing at The Cloisters are not the true species, but only forms of them, the Acanthus mollis being the variety longifolius, which is the most spectacular, robust, and hardy of all. Our Acanthus spinosus is without spines except for those on the leaflets and bracts of the flowers.

In the United States the plants are probably not hardy farther north than Virginia without winter protection. Here in New York they require a very deep mulching over the winter. This, however, has not proved very successful at The Cloisters, where the two kinds of acanthus are planted out in the herb garden during the summer. To avoid the risk of having them winter-killed, they are carefully dug up in the late fall, potted on, and kept indoors.

Acanthuses are perennial and grow on from year to year except for a short resting period after blooming. The ones that do not flower keep on growing and seem not to want a particular time to rest. They present no difficulty either outdoors or in pots. They like a deep rich soil, good drainage, lots of moisture except when resting and during the darkest winter months), and protection from too strong sunlight and high winds. The leaves arise directly from a thickened root stock. New shoots form at the end of underground runners, and these can be segregated and started as new plants. In this climate they do not readily set seeds even with the help of hand pollination. It takes about three seasons’ growth to make a good flowering plant. In pots they do not get to be as large as when grown out in the open, but they become handsome specimens indeed, and are suitable as house plants in sunrooms.

From the end of May through June is the usual blooming period for plants grown indoors; June, July, and August for those in the open. From the time the flower bud first appears at the base of the leaves to the opening of the first flower is about two months or more. The flowers are sessile and grow on the upper half of a spike three feet or more in height. In warmer climates, where the plants winter over outdoors, the spike attains a height of six feet or more. A pot-grown Acanthus spinosus has about forty to fifty flowers on a stalk, usually arranged in a perfect symmetrical system of opposite pairs. The individual flowers are not particularly attractive. They remind one of a cross between a snapdragon and a mint blossom, but the spike as a whole has a striking, unusual appearance.

Our Acanthus mollis longifolius at The Cloisters blossomed for the first time this spring. The spike is about as tall as that of the Acanthus spinosus. The flowers are larger and fewer and are not arranged symmetrically but grow more loosely in a whorled fashion, starting above the middle of the stem. The two types are nearly identical and of the same pale lavender-rose, almost white, with a purplish green hooded sepal above the lower petal, cov-
Acanthus capitals in the Saint-Guilhem cloister and the Acanthus mollis longifolius
The Acanthus spinosus in the Cuxa Cloister. Photographs by Charles Sheeler
ering practically all of it except the three-parted lip. The leaves of the two species are a luxuriant deep green and have a silky sheen. In outline they differ. The Acanthus spinosus has narrow, more or less oblong leaves, which are deeply pinnately lobed and are held on a short petiole only one quarter as long as the leaf blade. The leaves of the Acanthus mollis longifolius are broader, ovate in outline with a petiole twice the length of the leaf blade, and are slightly hairy underneath; the margins are irregular and shallower-lobed. A well-grown pot plant has leaves three feet in length and over.

During the winter months, until about the middle of February, acanthuses grown indoors can be kept in full sunlight if given an occasional sprinkling over to keep them from wilting. Watering must be done with caution, if possible only on bright days. Sogginess about the roots results in rotting of the crown. When the plants are actively growing, and particularly when flower buds appear, it is advisable to feed them once or twice a week, depending, as in watering, on the right kind of weather conditions.

There is a general theory that the acanthus blooms only in alternating years, but some of our potted plants have defied this rule and produced a spike for the past several seasons in succession. One English gardener who had an Acanthus spinosissimus, which is somewhat like Acanthus spinosus only smaller and more prickly, waited twenty-five years to see the first bloom.

The illustration on page 248 is from a reproduction of the Codex Aniciae Julianae in the Pierpont Morgan Library. Before the war the original was in Vienna.

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