

ELEMENTARY SCIENCE SECTION**THE WORLD'S MOST IMPORTANT PLANT FAMILY**

Grass is the most important plant family in the world. An important Philippine member of the grass family is the bamboo.

THERE is a fable of a magic carpet that carries one to wealth and the world's wonders. Grasses—the most important and useful family of the whole vegetable kingdom—might be called such a magic carpet for the earth's surface. Wild and cultivated, the grass family is the greatest contributor to the needs of human and animal life, and therefore grass is the world's most important plant family.

Four very important members of the grass family are grown in the Philippines. They are bamboo, rice, sugarcane, and corn. Another important grass, not grown in the Philippines, is wheat from which is made the wheat flour that supplies our bread.

Grasses are the most widely distributed

of all the plant families. The giants of the family are the bamboos such as we have in the Philippines. Small and middle-sized grasses grow in greatest luxuriance in the temperate zones, although grasses not over two inches high cling close to the cold ground right up to the borders of the field of ice and snow in the frigid zones.

There are more than 4,000 species of grasses in this large and very important family. Grasses grow, or can be made to grow, on all kinds of soil and in all sorts of conditions. They thrive on the banks of streams, along the seashore, in the low, wet marshlands, on the sunny meadows, or in the shade of woodlands.

The grasses can boast of their long ancestry, for they belong to one of the oldest families of the vegetable kingdom. As far back as history can go, grasses were growing in abundance.

One of the most important things grasses do is to bind down the soil until plants of larger and slower growth can establish themselves, and even then the grasses protect the roots of trees and other plants. They are among the first of plants to cover waste or barren ground and to reclaim a neglected roadway or field. They are well-fitted for making their own way in the world. They are rapid growers. Bamboo shoots sometimes grow two or three feet in 24 hours.

The colossal treelike grass called bamboo has well been styled "one of the most wonderful and most beautiful productions of the tropics, and one of Nature's most valuable gifts to man." It is a gift,

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PLANT FAMILY

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too, with which Nature has been most generous, for more than 200 species of bamboo are found in Asia, South America, and Africa. A single root may grow as many as a hundred polished joined stems rising 30, 50, or even 120 feet in the air. Some species are three feet around.

Of course, we who live in the Philippines are accustomed to many of the innumerable uses of bamboo. Living in the Philippines would be difficult indeed, without the many things made from bamboo.

Most of us have eaten the tender shoots of bamboo, but not so many of us have eaten the seeds of those species of bamboo whose fruit is a grain, like barley and rye, and which is also eaten. The Chinese have a proverb that the bamboo seed is more plentiful when the rice crop fails. Some species have a fruit, not unlike an apple, that is baked and used as food.

From the interior portions of certain kinds of bamboo a fine variety of paper is made. The outer skin of some bamboo is so hard that native knives and swords have been made from it with a sharp and durable cutting edge.

Let us remember this: that the bamboo is only one member of the 4,000 species belonging to the grass family. Then perhaps we can realize that the grass family—to which the important rice, corn, sugarcane, and wheat also belong—is the world's most important plant family.