



Gardeners Helping Gardeners Succeed

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Caring for Houseplants

Light:

All plants use light to manufacture food and to grow. Very few houseplants can withstand direct sunlight all of the time. The general rule is that blooming plants and plants that bear fruit require more light than those plants that only produce leaves. Most plants are divided into four light requirement categories: full sun, light shade, shade, and deep shade.

Full sun means the plant prefers a south facing window with no screening. **Light shade** could be in the same window however some screening (window covering) can create light shade requirements. An east facing window can be considered a light shade area. North facing windows are considered **shade** but this window should not be darkened by trees. Six feet from a southern exposure window could be considered shade. **Deep shade** areas receive very little daylight.

The amount of time that a plant spends in the light affects its health. Plants require at least six hours of darkness every 24 hours. In natural surroundings, the length of day changes with the seasons. For most plants, the shorter days of fall and winter signal to the plant to begin dormancy. However, some plants like the Christmas Cactus and Poinsettia begin their bloom period with the shortening of days. Poinsettias will take much longer to begin their bloom period.

Temperature: Most plants have certain requirements related to the minimum night temperatures. Night temperatures (above 52 degrees) are usually used because the daytime temperature can change dramatically depending upon the sunlight intensity.

Water: Over watering of houseplants is the most common reason for plant death. Common sense is the best guide for figuring out how much water a plant needs. The danger of over watering can be lessened if the pot has good drainage. One of the best methods to tell when a plant needs water is to feel the soil. Stick your finger about 1/2 inch into the soil to see how it feels. If it feels moist, wait a day or two before watering and be sure to check again before you water. Another method is to use a moisture meter. Keeping the soil too moist makes a great home for fungus or black soil gnats.

The three methods of watering are:

Top Watering: Pour water on top of the soil and stop when you see the water coming out of the bottom of the pot. Best to water in the morning to allow time for the water to soak in. Morning watering also helps eliminate problems with diseases. Try not to get the water on the foliage.

Bottom Watering: Water plants with tender roots such as African violets by placing the water in a saucer placed under the pot. Water is drawn into the soil through the hole in the bottom of the pot. Take the pot out of the water when you see damp spots on the surface of the soil. Remove any excess water from the saucer. Salts can accumulate on the top of the soil with this method and can injure your plant. Flush the salts away with top-watering.

Plunging: Shrubby plants in well-draining pots which shed excess water usually get this type of watering. Submerge the pot in water. Plunging removes air from the soil so when the bubbles stop, remove the plant, and allow it to drain.

Humidity:

The atmospheric humidity affects how much water the plant loses through transpiration. Also the type of leaves that the plant has will affect the water loss. Shiny leathery leaves, such as a *Ficus* lose water slowly and therefore tolerate dry air. Heated homes are usually very dry because heating the air temperature reduces the humidity.

To maintain proper humidity try these methods:

Grouping: Place plants together to prevent drying out. As plants transpire, they increase the humidity around each other. Group plants with similar water needs together for both convenience and health.

Stone and Tray Method: This is one of the best methods to increase humidity. Place plants in a tray filled with stones or pebbles that are kept consistently wet. Set plants on top of the stones but not touching the water.

Humidifiers: By far the best solution is to buy a humidifier.

Washing Foliage: This is one of the best things that you can do for a plant with shiny or smooth leaves. Washing helps with the humidity, clears the pores of dust, and helps control pests. Use clear, lukewarm water and either spray the leaves or wash them gently with a soft sponge. If you have problems with pests, wash the leaves with a weak solution of one tablespoon of soap to one quart of water or use Spray Grip to clean. Rinse the leaves with clear water and let the plant dry out of the sun. Do not wash the leaves of hairy plants. Use a small artists brush to remove the dust.

Feeding:

Most plants absorb the necessary nutrients from the soil to keep them alive. The more rapidly a plant grows, the more nutrients it needs. Fertilizers provide 3 basic nutrients for plants. The mixture is usually listed on the label of the fertilizer. A mixture of 5-10-5 has 5% nitrogen, 10% phosphorus, and 5% potassium. Nitrogen helps with leaf growth and makes foliage green. Phosphorus develops healthy roots and stems. Potassium helps with the production of blooms and resistance to disease. Fertilizers usually come in two types, slow release granules which can last up to 3 months, and water-soluble which work immediately. It is important not to exceed the quantities listed by the manufacturer.

Potting and Repotting:

Whether you use plastic or clay, the type of pot will make some difference in the amount of water a plant requires. Clay pots absorb more water and therefore the plant requires additional water. A plastic potted plant requires about 1/3 less water than the same plant potted in a clay pot. Make sure any pot that you have has drainage holes. Metal containers should not be used to plant as they can poison your plant.

Repotting is necessary when the root system fills the pot. A new pot should be 1 inch larger for plants in 10 inch or smaller pots. For larger plants, the pot should be at least 2 inches larger. It is best to water the plant thoroughly before removing a plant for repotting. This loosens the soil making it easier to remove. Roots that have grown through the drainage hole should not be cut off; it is better to break the pot. If a section of the root system is damaged while repotting, remove a part of the foliage to compensate for the root system loss.

Common Problems with House Plants

Problem	Frequent Cause
No Growth	Usually means insufficient light. Move to brighter location.
Unbalanced Growth	Turn plant when watering for even exposure to light.
Leggy Plant	Insufficient light. Move to brighter location. Too much nitrogen can also be a cause. Reduce feeding.
Small Flowers or No Bloom	Overfeeding promotes foliage but not blossoms. Withhold fertilizer. Insufficient light can also be a cause. Move to a brighter location.
New leaves are small	Plant may need feeding or a new location. In some species, such as <i>Philodendron</i> , the cause may be too much light. In others, such as African Violet, it may be too little light.
Curled Leaves	Too much light or heat. Try moving plant. Check for aphids.
Brown Leaf Tips or Spots	Drafts, too much sun and too low humidity can cause brown spots. Try moving plant. Salt build-up in the soil also may be cause. Repot plant.
Spots on Leaves	Cold water on leaves or overwatering can be causes. Aerate soil and try bottom watering.
Pale Leaves with Green Veins	Too little light, poor drainage or an iron shortage are possible causes. Move plant and treat with chelated iron.
Yellow Leaves	Low humidity, too much light or too much heat can all be causes. Plant may be pot bound or underfed. Move and repot

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Leaf Drop	Changes in location, temperature, or light conditions can cause foliage to drop. Try to minimize these changes and let the plant adjust to its location. Drafts should be avoided. Insufficient water or fertilizer can also be a cause.
Dull or Crackling Leaves	Low humidity is probable cause. Mist more frequently or try the stone and tray method.
Wilt	Dry soil, too little or too much light, too high temperature or lack of moisture in the air. Move plant to cooler location. Mist more frequently or use stone and tray method. Check for pot bound condition.
Plant drains out too Quickly	Soil is too porous or plant is pot bound. Repot.
White or Green Stain on Sides of Pot, White Scum on Soil.	Salts accumulated from fertilizer. Flush soil with water several times. Repot if desired.