

Houseplant Care

by Donna Kuba, Master Gardener Intern

Having plants in our homes gives us opportunities to grow things that would not normally live in our climate, allows us to garden all year round, and adds a bit of natural beauty to the indoors. At the same time, plants in the home help cleanse the inside air, and add moisture to dry, indoor environments, especially in winter.

Indoor plants, or houseplants, whether they are year-round residents or winter visitors brought in from our gardens, all have the same basic requirements as outdoor plants: light, moisture, and nutrients. With a little effort, we can stand in for Mother Nature and provide our plants with a healthy environment and be rewarded by seeing a healthy, green plant thrive and, often, flower under our care.

Start with a healthy plant

The first step in growing strong, happy houseplants is to make sure they are disease and pest-free before they come into the house.

If your plants summer outdoors, inspect them for pests and diseases, paying particular attention to the undersides of leaves and the soil. A good soak in a pail full of water will help get rid of soil-borne pests and a strong shower from the garden hose will help dislodge pests on and under leaves. If, as a last resort, you have to use a pesticide, it is better to do it before you bring the plant indoors. Whenever using any pesticide, make sure what you are using is appropriate for the problem, read the directions carefully, and follow them exactly for the best and safest results.

When purchasing a plant, check the care label to ensure you can provide the environment required by that particular plant. Next, carefully inspect the plant for any signs of insects, diseases, or improper culture like completely dried out soil, or wilted or discolored leaves or stems.

Because plants can come from everywhere and anywhere around the world, and are as individual as people are, it pays to become familiar with the needs of each of your plants and what is “normal” for them. If you do, you can give them proper care from the beginning and, if the plant develops a problem, you can diagnose it correctly.

Light

All plants need light, but not all plants need the same amount of light. When finding the best location for a plant in your home, remember that there are many factors that affect light levels inside the home including orientation, location of windows, shrubs and trees growing near the home, as well as other buildings nearby.

Care instructions will tell you if a plant needs low, medium, or high light levels. Low light generally means that the location gets some light and can even be bright, but not direct. Low light often comes through north, north-east or east-facing windows. Medium light consists of several hours of bright light, though not necessarily direct, and often comes through windows facing east or west. High light is usually defined as several hours of bright, direct or indirect light usually coming from the west or south. Since conditions will be different in every home, a certain amount of trial and error is required to find a “happy” place for the plants that you want to grow. It is important to observe the plant in its location at several times during the day to see how light reaches it and if it is reacting well to the location. Don’t be afraid to try different location to find one that is most suitable.

Remember that moving a plant just a few inches away from a window can substantially reduce the amount of light it gets, especially in winter when light is less intense than in summer. Most plants also go through a period of acclimation from the conditions in a green house or garden center or our gardens when they come into our homes, so growth may slow down and a certain amount of leaf drop can be expected.

There are some signs to watch for that will tell you a plant needs different light conditions. Dried out, bleached or burned spots on leaves can mean the plant is getting too much direct sun. “Leggy” stems stretching toward a light source with greater than normal spaces between the leaves are an indication that the plant needs more light. If your home does not have sufficient light coming in through the windows, it is possible to supplement with plant lights. Even an incandescent table lamp can provide extra light, but remember incandescent bulbs get hot, so don’t place a plant too close to the bulb or the leaves may burn.

Moisture

Like light, all plants need water, but not all plants need the same amount of water. Part of a plant’s water requirement is determined by the season, whether the plant is growing actively or resting, whether the temperature is warm or cool, or the amount of light a plant receives. Overwatering or, perhaps, overestimating the amount of water a plant needs indoors, causes many houseplant problems from wilted leaves to root rot. Indoor plants, especially in winter, receive substantially less light than they do outside. When a plant gets less light, it grows more slowly and uses less water. A rule of thumb – actually a rule of finger – if the soil feels dry when you stick a finger into it to the second knuckle, it is time to water. Some people like to water on a schedule – once a week perhaps – but observation is still the best tool to use when deciding whether a plant needs more water. If leaves are beginning to droop and the soil is still moist, that is a sign that the plant already has too much water. Drooping leaves are not always a signal to get out the watering can.

For most plants, it is best to water “from above”, into the soil in the pot, until water comes out into the saucer beneath. Some plants that have fuzzy leaves, like African

Violets, should be watered from below, into the saucer, so the leaves don't get wet. However, even plants that need a lot of water don't like to have wet feet, so water should not stand in the saucer more than a half hour after watering.

If the soil in the pot has dried so much that it has pulled away from the sides, water will run right through without benefiting the plant. Submerge the whole pot in a pail of water for as long as it takes to moisten the soil thoroughly and then wait for just the top inch to dry out before watering again.

Some plants like a more humid atmosphere than most of us have in our homes in winter, when heating makes the indoor air dry. Clustering plants can raise humidity levels or placing them on a tray which contains stones and water can help. Just be sure that the pot is sitting on stones above the water to avoid having a waterlogged plant.

Nutrients

Plants get their nutrients from the soil in which they are planted. Most potting soils are rich in organic matter, so newly potted plants usually do not need extra nutrients. Over time, however, plants use up the nutrients in the soil or watering leaches them out, so a supplement is needed.

Fertilizer comes in different combinations of the three elements that plants need most: nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. Fertilizer labels will have three numbers representing the percentage of each element contained in it. Fertilizers higher in nitrogen promote green growth and are best for leafy plants that are not grown for their flowers. Fertilizers made for flowering plants usually have higher percentages of phosphorus and potassium than nitrogen. They also come in many different forms; liquids, concentrates and time-release capsules. No matter which fertilizer you use, read the directions on the label carefully and do not over-fertilize.

Plants need more nutrients when they are growing actively during spring and summer, less in the fall and hardly any in the winter. However, plants that are kept indoors all year long should be fertilized year round. Some people like to fertilize their plants at every watering so they will not forget to do it. If you decide to follow that routine, dilute the fertilizer so that if you water once a week, fertilizer is at one quarter strength. It is important not to over fertilize your plants. In this case more is not better. Over-fertilization can burn delicate roots, and cause leaf burn and misshapen leaves. One sign of over-fertilization is an accumulation of whitish crust on the surface of the soil and on the pot. If you see a crusty buildup, you can leach the soil by running tepid water through it several times. If a plant has been attacked by pests or disease, it is natural to want to "medicate" it, but extra fertilizing can actually weaken a diseased plant, so resist the urge and treat the problem instead.

Plant Maintenance

Once you have found the right place for your plants and established a watering and fertilizing routine, the rest is pretty easy. Keep leaves clean and free from dust. If a lot of dust accumulates, wiping off leaves with a soft damp cloth should be sufficient. Remove dead leaves and trim off any with any signs of disease.

Plants sitting in a window are only getting light from one direction and they will grow unevenly if left alone. Rotate your plants so that growth is even all the way around.

Check to see if roots are growing out of the bottom of the pot. If so, lift the plant gently out of the pot to see if the roots have completely filled the pot. Unless the plant is one that likes to be rootbound, like spider plant, repot it in a slightly large pot, spreading out the roots and filling it with new potting soil. The best time to repot is in late winter or early spring before the plant begins active growth.

Watch for signs of insects and diseases. Look underneath leaves and in leaf axils for scale, mealy bugs, and webs of tiny red spider mites. Try washing insects off plants or use insecticidal soap or horticultural oil always following label directions.

If you find you have a problem with insects or diseases, or need specific help with a plant or gardening questions, go to the VCE website, call your County Extension Agent's help line or bring your questions to the summer plant clinics hosted by county master gardener programs at libraries and farmers markets.

Happy gardening and enjoy your "green" home!

To contact Fairfax County Master Gardeners Association: by phone - 703-324-8556; by email - mqfairfax@vt.edu