

Houseplants



Marg Hundt Peterborough and Area Master Gardeners

If you are like me, you love your houseplants. I have an assortment of plants that are so very special to me. They make me happy. Their colors add cheer to my life and the smell and feel of greenery help soften some of the harsh elements in everyday routines.

Research has shown that working with or handling plants lowers blood pressure, eases stress and generally makes people feel better. They are therapy for the elderly or disabled and bring nature indoors to those who can't go out. In the business world, plants, not only raise humidity levels, making the workplace more comfortable, but the moisture they release seems to suppress air born microbes. In a closed building there are many indoor pollutants from copy machines, printers, rugs, insulation, furniture veneer etc and they give off volatile chemicals such as benzene, trichloroethylene, ammonia and formaldehyde. Plants improve air quality by absorbing pollutants through their leaves, where naturally occurring microorganisms break down the chemicals. In fact one spider plant in an enclosed chamber filled with formaldehyde removed 85% of the pollutant in one day. Some of the best plants for removing pollutants are Boston ferns, Spider plants, Dracaena, Bamboo palm, Rubber plants, English Ivy, Peace Lily, Weeping Fig and Corn Plants.

House plants are really outdoor plants, but in our climate they would die, so we bring them in. We all know the one rule for success is "the right plant in the right place". For a plant to thrive they should be in an environment as close as possible to the one they evolved in. Yet our indoor environments are alien to all and downright hostile to many of our potted friends. Light, heat and moisture are things we must consider. Winter months are dark, so for plants that need lots of light we should choose a west window because of the concentrated quality of sunlight in the late afternoon. A south window provides

direct light farther into the room in winter but heat build up is greater in summer. North windows provide low indirect light and east windows strike a nice compromise. The farther away from the window, the less light there will be and as the spring approaches the sun is gradually getting warmer and the days longer, so you may have to move your plants slightly.

Our houses are very dry in the winter. Without water a plant will die, however, too much will prevent air getting to the roots and thereby encourage root-rotting disease. More plants die from over watering than under watering. The proper frequency of watering is not a constant and depends on the type of plant, the size, the size of the pot, the environment and especially the time of the year. A tray of coarse gravel filled with water that your pots can sit on without actually touching the water will provide them with the increased humidity they need. Plant comfort levels average a humidity level of 85% whereas most homes have levels closer to 35% and often lower when heating and air conditioning are factored in. Those of us on city water must draw the water at least 24 hours ahead of usage, to let the chlorine dissipate and you should always water your plants with water at room temperature. Turn the plant a ¼ (one quarter) turn with each watering to maintain a good symmetrical appearance.

Maintaining healthy plants is the best way to keep problems away. Good house keeping is important for this, so cut off the dead leaves and clean up any that have fallen on the soil.

Investing in a good indoor flower book is one of the best guides for care of each individual plant. They all have special needs.

February, March and April are tough months for houseplants. Aphids, mealybugs, scale and spider mites are some of the insects that might infect your plants. There are also diseases such as Botrytis, leaf spot and powdery mildew and others that are “nasty”. Identifying these and treating appropriately is essential. If you have managed to keep all your plants alive until now, give yourself a pat on the back. Me, I always loose one or two each year. Anyway, that gives me a good reason to buy something new.

Now is the time of the year that the sun is getting stronger, the days longer and the plants are “coming alive” again. Start fertilizing again and watch the plants start to grow and new shoots appear. You will be able to start “slipping” some leaves and others that have babies can move to their own pots for new plants this coming season. Your friends might also be lucky enough to get one of your offspring.

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