

# Winter Houseplant Care

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**Houseplants are not just a “pretty face.” They help make our indoor environment healthier.**

NASA did extensive studies on plant filtering as a way to reduce the pollutants emitted by the equipment in the space shuttle. Their findings showed that houseplants reduced pollutants. All houseplants improve the air quality, but here’s a list of the most efficient houseplants.

- florist’s mum
- pygmy date palm
- “Janet Craig” dracaena
- “Kimberly Queen” fern
- bamboo palm
- rubber plant
- English ivy
- weeping fig
- peace lily
- areca palm
- corn plant
- Chinese evergreen
- spider plant
- devil’s ivy
- flamingo lily
- Barberton daisy
- variegated snake plant

## **Lighting**

Here’s a simple test: Hold your hand above your plant around mid-day. If your hand does not cast a definitive shadow, the light is too low. If you can only provide a low light source, move your plant as close to the light source as possible.

Another simple test is to try to read the newspaper in the location of your plant. If you cannot or have great difficulty reading the print, your light source is not sufficient and you should find another location or provide an artificial source to brighten the area.

## **Tips:**

- Provide reflected light with a light-colored wall or mirror.
- Keep the leaves of your houseplants free of dust and grime to enable them to absorb more light.

## **Controlling Pests on Your Houseplants**

If we detect a pest invading our houseplants, we have a tendency to grab the handiest chemical control and go after them. But, wait! Before you spray, consider the fact that your house is not getting much ventilation this time of year and the interior air quality of our homes during the winter is normally poor. We don’t want to worsen our home air quality by adding chemicals.

- First, take some preventive measures with your house plants by not letting fallen leaves accumulate in the pots or over-watering your plants. Both these situations encourage pests who like to feed on dead plant material and thrive in soggy soil environments.
- Sometimes, just taking the plant outside and giving it a thorough, vigorous spraying with plain water is all that is needed to blow those pests into the great outdoors.
- Look closely at both sides of the leaves and examine the stems regularly for pests so you can handle them before they become a real nuisance and spread to other plants. Giving the pot a little shake or lightly brushing the leaves will disturb common pests such as aphids, whiteflies or fungus gnats so they are easily detectable. Common pests such as aphids and mealy bugs can be controlled, if detected early, by dabbing them with cotton swabs dipped in rubbing alcohol.



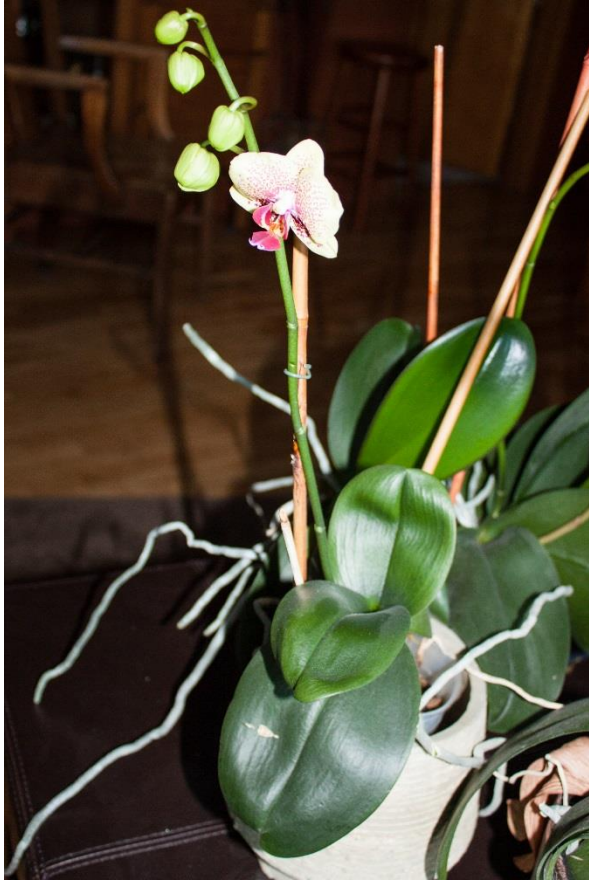
African violets can add a pop of color to a room and often bloom year round. *Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener.*

- For larger insects or light infestations of mealy bugs or scales, remove them by hand or scrape them with just a toothpick.
- Spraying with an insecticidal soap that is registered for use on houseplants is normally effective on most common pests. An exception is winged adult pests, such as whiteflies, because they leave the plant during treatment and return later.
- Reading labels is always critical when you are spraying indoors. Pets and small children are very susceptible to sprays. Even products that are recommended for indoor use can have objectionable odors or cause allergic reactions. This is especially true in a closed environment without ventilation.

### **Watering and Fertilizing**

Will adding and/or increasing the fertilizer help revive a sad looking plant? The one thing you do **not** want to do when plants are stressed or sick is to fertilize. Check for other possible causes for your plant's problem.

- The cause of many plant ailments is over watering. Do not water unless the surface is dry. It would be even better if you checked at least one inch down in soil to make sure it is not damp. If it is dry, water thoroughly with water that is room temperature. Don't let water sit in the plant's saucer after it has drained.
- Clean the plant's leaves with a mild solution of dish soap. Using this soap solution, clean the saucer and bottom of the pot.
- If you notice pests on some of the leaves, remove those leaves immediately and destroy them or place in the garbage. Do not compost them.
- Make sure your plant is not located close to a heat source, such as a baseboard heater or wood stove.
- Many plants require a more humid climate than the average home. Ferns, ivies and other humid-climate plants may grow best in bathrooms or kitchens where the air usually is more humid. Grouping plants together in the same room raises the relative humidity for all. Plants transpire water continuously. The more plants you grow, the more water they transpire into the air, which is good for a dry interior environment during the winter.
- If your only good light location is also near a heating vent or heater that plants generally don't like, use a shallow dish, such as a glass baking dish, and fill it with gravel or small rocks. Fill the dish with water just below the level of the rocks and place the pots on top. Be sure the water does not go over the rocks leaving the plants to sit in the water. (It is best to keep the pots in saucers.) The water will create a "dome" of humidity around the plants and help to keep them from drying out. Your plants should need less watering and not dry out completely. For rocks, use either white rocks, available in garden supply stores or the aquarium section of pet stores. When used in glass baking dishes, they make a very attractive display.



Orchids often thrive on neglect, which can be good for first-time houseplant owners. *Photo by Cathy Grant / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener.*

## **RESOURCES:**

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