

# Houseplants – Part 2

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## **Take good care of your houseplants - they're taking care of you**

Houseplants bring a bit of the garden, forest, and even the jungle into our homes. But the benefits are more than aesthetic – these plants are good for your health. Many varieties, especially spider plants and golden pothos, purify the air by removing many hazardous volatile organic compounds. NASA scientists discovered that indoor houseplants remove these toxins emitted from drying paints, along with glues used in furniture, cabinetry, and flooring. A study in the American Society of Horticultural Science's journal HortTechnology found that indoor houseplants eliminate indoor ozone, which can trigger chronic respiratory problems and skin irritation.

Creating a welcoming environment for houseplants means providing the appropriate amount of light and humidity, the right temperature range, soil conditions and nutrients. A book on houseplants will help you identify what you have, or want, and the conditions each variety needs. Specialized websites can also be useful (see the Resources list.)

Plants requiring “high” light grow best next to a large south or west-facing window. Smaller east or west windows yield “medium” light. North-facing windows and those shaded by trees, buildings, etc., offer only “low” light. Any plant placed more than a couple of feet away from any window, regardless where it faces, will receive low light. Some people invest in artificial light to supplement our region’s elusive rays.

## **Water and Humidity**

Most houseplants go dormant in the winter. With no new growth, plants need less water than the rest of the year. Houseplants can suffer as much from overwatering as underwatering. To determine when to water your plants, push your finger about an inch into the soil. If the dirt feels damp, check again in a few days. When the top layer of soil is dry, and your finger encounters dry soil, it’s time to water. Don’t just moisten the soil surface; give the plant a thorough soaking until a little water runs out of the pot's drainage hole.

If most of the water runs straight out the bottom without soaking in, the soil is so dry it’s contracted. To water dried-out soil, put the container in a bowl or sink full of water up to the container rim. Let the soil slowly absorb water, then drain the pot in an empty sink. Remember to regularly monitor the soil to avoid another drought. Many houseplants prefer a humidity level of 40 to 50 percent – remember, they have tropical ancestors. In winter, the outside humidity often reaches 100 percent, while indoor heating can significantly reduce moisture. Create a more humid climate for plants

by grouping them together, placing them on trays or saucers filled with pea gravel or pebbles. Pour water on the gravel, but keep containers above the water to ensure drainage. The evaporating water will increase humidity around the plant. This is more effective than misting plants with a water spray bottle, unless you spray the foliage several times a day. To have a life beyond houseplant care, use the water-and-gravel tray beneath plant pots.

### **Diet and Temperature**

The temptation to overfeed your plants is almost as strong as the urge to overwater them. More is not better when it comes to plant fertilizers - overfeeding weakens plants, leaving them susceptible to disease. As with water, plants receiving lots of light need more fertilizer than those in dimmer locations. Since most plants are dormant in winter, don't fertilize until new growth begins in the spring.

A balanced indoor plant food has an equal ratio of the three main nutrients: nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K.) For houseplants, frequent weak applications of fertilizer are better than infrequent heavy applications.

Most houseplants grow well with daytime temperatures of 65 to 75F and night temperatures of 60 to 65F. Luckily, my jade and aloe plants survive my frugal heating plan, where the winter daytime temperature is rarely higher than 60F and nighttime is above freezing but below 55F. Your plants may not be so tolerant. All houseplants dislike cold drafts, radiators, hot air vents or touching cold windows.

Give your houseplants the right conditions and care, and they'll add color and texture to your home for years. Reducing toxic chemicals from indoor air is a bonus.



Photo by gaucho



Photo by Tarquin at en.wikipedia

**Left:** Whiteflies are not true flies; they're closely related to scales, mealybugs and aphids. These very small ( 1/16 inch) white moth-like insects can be washed from leaves with water. To remove a heavy infestation, apply neem oil for five days. **Right:** Scales are tiny pests the size of a pinhead to a dried pea.

## **Six Common Houseplant Pests and Diseases: Non-Toxic Control from Organic Gardening magazine**

**Aphids:** These small white, green, black, brown or orange pests are often found in clusters on tip growth and flower buds. A strong spray of water usually dislodges them. Give the plant a shower in your sink or tub.

**Mealybugs:** These pests appear as tiny white cotton-like tufts, usually clustered in sheltered areas of stems or the underside of leaves. Remove by apply rubbing alcohol to individual mealybugs (white tufts) using a cotton swab.

**Mites:** About the size of a grain of salt, mites are hard to see, but their damage is not. Look for mottled or stippled leaves, deformed flowers and fine webbing over damaged leaves. A strong spray of water, on both sides of leaves, will usually eliminate mites.

**Scales:** These tiny pests create a tough shell looking like an immobile brown or tan dot, ranging in size from a pinhead to a dried pea. If you find sticky sap anywhere, check leaves and stems directly above the goo. Scrape scales off leaves and stems with a fingernail or dull knife, or apply horticultural oil to smother scales.

**Whiteflies:** If you brush against a plant and see white specks scattering, these are whiteflies. Spray insecticidal soap on leaves, especially the undersides.

### **RESOURCES**

- The Complete Houseplant Survival Manual, Barbara Pleasant, Storey Publishing 2006
- “Interiorscape Plants Picture Pages,” Cynthia McKenney, Texas A&M University Extension: <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/interiorscape/>
- “Organic Houseplant Care,” Organic Gardening Magazine: <http://www.organicgardening.com/learn-and-grow/organic-houseplant-care?page=0,2>
- “Cuidado de las plantas de interiores,” Extension de la Universidad de Illinois: [http://urbanext.illinois.edu/houseplants\\_sp/caring.cfm](http://urbanext.illinois.edu/houseplants_sp/caring.cfm)