

## Houseplant Basics



Christmas Cactus

If you go into a funk because your garden has been put to bed, the days are short, light is low and you feel like sleeping until spring; there are always houseplants. Indoor plants can do a lot for your psyche, by creating an attractive restful setting. Not only do they convert carbon dioxide to oxygen, but they attract and absorb many of the compounds which are released into our indoor air by the everyday items in our homes and offices. The variety of houseplants is infinite, and the choices are limited only by the time, effort, and expense you want to invest. Indoor plants are those that cannot survive our cold season outside. They may be those tender perennials that you bring inside to overwinter.

The information on houseplant care is vast and differs by plant type – just as for your outside garden plants. Provide the correct light, temperature, relative humidity, water, nutrition and growing medium and your houseplants will thrive. Like your outside plants – the key is matching your plants needs to its proper inside environment.

### Light

**Direct sun** (sunny – ha ha in the PNW): The brightest place will be a south or southwest facing window or a sun room if you have one. Place the plant within 2 feet of the window.

**Bright** (indirect sun): Place the plant within 4-5 feet of an east or west facing window or 3-5 feet from a window that faces south or southwest. The room should get several hours of sun per day.

**Partially shaded** (low light): Place the plant in an east facing window or directly in front of a north facing window to provide lower light conditions. You do not want the plant to heat up. Usually morning sun is cooler.

**Shady**: Hallways, staircases, and corners will generally be low light areas.

Your plant will tell you if it is not happy. Spindly growth, stretching toward the light, lower leaves turn yellow and drop, new leaves are smaller. With too much light leaves may become dry and fall off, the plant may wilt at midday, or you will see brown scorched patches on the leaves.



Mother in Law's Tongue

Artificial light is always a possibility if your house lacks suitable areas for your indoor plants. However, most generally there are plants that will thrive in low light situations.

## Water

Overwatering is the number one killer of houseplants. Soggy soil absorbs oxygen and suffocates the roots which will lead to rot. Each plant's watering needs are different, and are affected by the growth cycle of the plant, the kind and size of container, and planting medium. Most of the time you are better off letting the plant partially dry out before watering. Use a moisture meter, or poke your finger into the soil up to the first knuckle. If it is dry, water. The key is to water well, but not often. Plants like tepid water temperature. Like us, cold water will give your plants a shock.

## Humidity



Peace Lilly

Humidity can be a problem in the winter with the furnace blasting and fireplace roaring. An easy way to create more humidity is to set your plants on a tray filled with pebbles. Fill the tray so that half of the pebbles are wet and the pot itself remains dry. Daily misting is always good for most indoor plants, except maybe cacti or succulents.

## Fertilizing

Your indoor plants need food too! Like all plants, they need nitrogen to nourish lush foliage and promote growth. Phosphorus promotes strong healthy roots and flowering. Potassium makes stems strong and helps fight off disease. Most plants like a balanced formula such as 10-10-10. Most of these needs can be met by using rich potting soil. However, plants that are not repotted often may require a boost. Weak new growth, pale leaves, dropped leaves or weak stems may indicate a need for fertilizer.

## Potting Soil

Your plants need a medium that supports erect growth, stores water and nutrients and provides proper drainage and air circulation so roots get oxygen. There are many commercial mixes available. Read the package to see that you are getting what you need for your plant. Here's what the basic ingredients provide: Peat moss adds lightness and retains water. It is good for plants that like moist soil such as African violets, ferns and begonias. Bark chunks prevent compaction and allow air circulation. This is particularly important for bromeliads and orchids. Sand is added to speed up drainage because coarse sand does not hold moisture well. This kind of mix is good for cacti, succulents, and plants native to sandy seashores. Be sure to use only horticultural or washed sand free from salt or other impurities. Vermiculite helps maintain aeration and absorbs water and minerals, releasing them slowly. Perlite comes from pieces of volcanic rock, which allow it to take up and release water quickly, thereby regulating the amount of water held in your mix and improving drainage.

## Repotting

Sooner or later your plant will need a new home. If you see roots on the soil surface or emerging from the drainage hole and the plant has stopped growing, it is time to repot. Generally repotting should be done at the beginning of the growth cycle, usually in spring. Young actively growing plants should be moved to a pot that is roughly two inches wider and/or deeper than the old pot. If your new pot is too big, the plant will spend more time growing roots. Give the plant some time to recuperate from the shock of repotting. Keep it out of the direct sun and keep the soil moist, not soggy. Fertilizing a newly repotted plant will cause burn. Give the plant about one month to help it reestablish its root system before fertilizing again.

## Cleaning

Cleaning your plants is one of the best ways to stave off pest and disease damage. Smooth leaves can be wiped clean with a damp sponge. Clean the cloth or sponge between plants to avoid spreading insects or disease. Brush hairy leaved plants like African violets with a soft brush. Using water will cause spots on these types of plants. Fine foliage plants, such as ferns, like showers. If possible, on a warmer day, take the plant outside and give it a 360 degree spray. Try to keep the soil from getting soggy and allow it to dry in a protected place before moving it back inside.

As you can see houseplants require a certain amount of care to thrive. They can be fussy and demanding or quite easy going depending on your temperament and/or interest level. Easy to grow houseplants share some common traits – they can survive these conditions - neglect, dry air, and low light, no pruning, and disease and insect resistance. If you are seeking plants that thrive or survive on benign neglect try these: Dragon Tree (*Dracaena marginata*), Jade Plant (*Crassula ovata*), Cactus (*Cactaceae* family), Ponytail Palm (*Beaucarnea recurvata*), Mother-in-Law's Tongue (*Sansevieria*), Spider Plant or Airplane Plant (*Chlorophytum comosum*), Wandering Jew (*Zebrina pendula*).

The following easy care plants are on the Poisonous House plant list and should be used with caution. Heartleaf Philodendron (*Philodendron scandens*) – may cause skin irritation.

Pothos or Devil's Ivy (*Epipremnum aureum*) – non-lethal, but causes burning sensation in mouth.

ZZ Plant (*Zamioculcas zamiifolia*) – all parts are poisonous.

These are just a few of the easy to grow houseplants on the poisonous list. Be sure to research any plant you bring into your home if you have young children or pets that may be intrigued by your new addition.

## References

[Guide to Houseplants](#). Retrieved 11/13/11

[Growing Indoor Plants with Success](#). The University of Georgia. Accessed 11/13/11

[Houseplant](#). Wikipedia. Retrieved 11/13/11



Pothos