



The Plant Room at Glenwood Square is a fun new place to get a winter plant fix and maybe a plant, too.
CAROL BARANY PHOTOS

Winter Gardens In Your Home

If a window lets in enough light to read a printed page, you can grow a plant there, too.

by Carol Barany for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

Ask any gardener in snowy January what they're craving, and most will tell you that it's the simple pleasure of puttering around plants. Research confirms what gardeners always knew. Our sense of well-being suffers when we're not outside, digging in the dirt. Research also suggests that when we must be cooped up indoors, the simple addition of plants to our indoor environment can make us happier and more relaxed.

Interest in houseplants has been steadily building, but surged in 2020. Facing long lockdowns in isolation during the Coronavirus pandemic, Americans turned to gardening for comfort. Sales of seeds and plants, both indoor and outdoor, soared like never before. Online plant communities sprung up everywhere, providing much needed social interactions for housebound "plant parents" during anxious and difficult times. The images they shared illustrated how the addition of a simple houseplant (or 10) could breathe life into the empty corners of their indoor spaces.

The National Garden Bureau has been featuring a "Plant of the Year" in five categories for four decades, choosing an annual, perennial, bulb, edible, and flowering shrub each January. Responding to this growing interest, the Bureau added a 'houseplant'



category for the first time this year, and named Peperomia as 2022's Houseplant of the Year.

Regardless of the houseplant you choose to grow, all share some basic requirements.

Light All plants need light to manufacture food. As a general rule, if the location you choose for your plants is bright enough to read this article by, many plants can thrive there. Some plants are tougher than the rest. I remember the year my Aunt Mary got tired of her snake plant and tried to kill it by putting it in a closet for months. It didn't work.

Humidity Most houseplants originated in tropical or semitropical regions, where the air is moist. Many plants can adapt to the drier air in our homes, but they do better when humidity is increased.

Temperature This group of plants is called "houseplants" because they need the same conditions we do to survive. Most prefer daytime temperatures ranging from the upper 60s° to the mid-70s°F, and nights that are about 10°F cooler.

Watering Use enough tepid water that the excess flows through the soil and out from the drainage hole in the bottom of the pot, but don't let the plant stand in water. Most plants do better when their soil dries to 1/2 to 2 in. below the surface between watering. Leaves will lose their sheen just before wilting, an SOS signal that it's time to water, but try not to wait that long.

Fertilize Plants need fertilizer in the spring and summer, when they are actively growing. Cut back in the fall, when growth slows, and stop fertilizing once daylight-savings time ends. When you do add fertilizer, always moisten the soil first.

Grooming Dust buildup encourages insects, and also filters the light that leaves need to manufacture food. Carefully clean the foliage when it seems dusty.

Insect pests Start by using a stream of water, or wipe them off with a cloth. If that doesn't work, call

the experts at our local WSU Cooperative Extension office at 574-1604 and speak to a Master Gardener. To effectively deal with insects, you must properly identify them, and know at what developmental stage they can best be managed.

But are they producing fresher air?

If you're growing houseplants, are you growing fresher air? Thirty years ago, NASA investigated the role houseplants might play in removing indoor air pollutants, hoping to apply any benefits to improving air quality in space stations. Based on their promising results, there's been a popular perception that if houseplants could cleanse the air in space housing, they could do it in our homes and apartments. Today, many scientists point out that NASA's results can only be applied to carefully sealed environments. And while it's true that indoor plants do purify the air, they do so at a rate too slow to make much of a difference in the average drafty home, where doors and windows open frequently.

Does it really matter? I don't need another reason to bring something beautiful into my home that lifts my mood and brightens my day.

The following plants were selected for the NASA trials, based on their ease of care and tolerance of low light. If these stalwarts can grow in outer space, they have a good chance of making it in on your windowsill. Here's NASA's list:

(Aglaonema modestum) Chinese evergreen, *Aloe vera*, *(Chamaedorea seifritzii)* bamboo or reed palm, *(Chlorophytum comosum)* spider plant, *(Dracaena deremensis)* 'Janet Craig' dracaena, *(Dracaena fragrans 'Massangeana')* mass cane, *(Dracaena marginata)* red-edged dracaena, *(Epipremnum aureum)* golden pothos, *(Ficus benjamina)* weeping fig, *(Hedera helix)* English ivy, *(Philodendron domesticum)* elephant ear philodendron, *(Philodendron scandens 'oxycardium')* heartleaf philodendron, *(Philodendron selloum)* lacy

tree philodendron, (*Sansevieria laurentii*) snake plant, and (*Spathiphyllum 'Mauna Loa'*) peace lily.

The University of Maine Extension has complete information on houseplant care at: <https://extension.umaine.edu/publications/2611e/>

