

TLC for Houseplants

With a little bit of tender loving care, houseplants can become a pleasure instead of a mystery, Think you have a brown thumb? Read on, and we'll change it to a green one!

Watering

Most plants indoors need watering ABOUT once a week. Every plant will differ, depending on a number of factors, such as the maturity of the plant's root system, what kind of pot holds the plant, where the plant is placed in relation to sunlight/heat/circulating air and exactly what kind of plant it is. Plants in windows will obviously dry out faster than those exposed to little direct sunlight. Check by looking to see if the soil looks dry; then put your finger into the soil about an inch (to the first joint) to see if it's moist. Plants should become slightly dry between waterings, but don't let them wilt: that's much too dry! To water correctly, pour enough water into the pot so that some comes out of the drainage hole. Discard the extra water. If the plant was very dry, water it again in about fifteen minutes. Don't let any plant stay constantly wet from standing water in the saucer. And keep in mind that more plants die indoors from too much watering than from too little.

If you're heading out on vacation, you have three options: either arrange for a neighbor to water your plants; try a self-watering pot; or set up a "tent" made of plastic bags to trap moisture around the plant. (If you set up a tent, be sure it is not in direct Sunlight!)

Repotting

If your plant is drying out every few days or stops growing, it may need repotting. Check the roots by gently removing the pot. Roots that are crowded, growing together, or circling the pot need repotting. Choose a pot 2-4 inches larger in diameter than the original. Loosen the plant roots thoroughly but carefully. Set the plant into the new pot so that the base of the plant (where plant meets soil) is at least one inch below the rim, and then add soil all around it. Make sure the soil line doesn't go above the base of the plant. Water thoroughly. (see Repotting Houseplants info sheet)

Cleaning

Taking off dead and dying leaves and cutting brown tips off of leaves will help you plant stay nice looking (and yes, it's perfectly normal for plants to occasionally lose a leaf). A vining plant such as ivy needs to be cut back for neatness. Be aggressive. The

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TLC for Houseplants cont.

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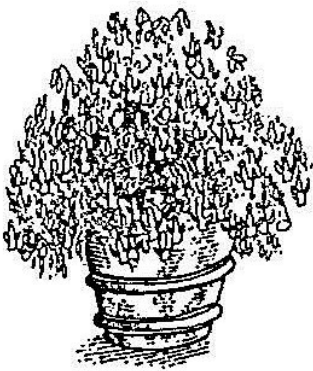
farther back you cut your plant, the fuller it will become. In fact, we've seen great results with over grown, scraggly, ugly plants that were cut back almost to the soil line: new growth is lush, shapely, healthy, and generally prettier. Plants breathe through their leaves, so keep them dust-free. This means wiping the leaves off with a damp rag or setting the whole plant in the shower (which would take care of watering, too). Just be careful that the shower spray doesn't dislodge and wash away the potting soil.

Humidity

Most plants thrive in high humidity; plants like ferns demand it. Unfortunately, our homes are usually very dry compared to outside air. To combat this problem, place a tray or saucer under your houseplants and fill it with pebbles. Add water until it's just below the top of the pebbles (remember, you want to keep those feet dry). As the water evaporates, it will increase the humidity level around the plant. Misting your plants daily is also very good (although droplets of water on plant leaves exposed to direct sunlight can act like a magnifying glass and "burn" the leaves).

Fertilizing

Houseplants need fertilizing with an all-purpose plant food such as Miracle Gro or Schultz Liquid Plant Food about once a month in spring and summer. Follow directions on the package. Flowering plants, like African violets and hibiscus, need fertilizing more often, using a special 12-36-14 fertilizer to keep blooms coming. Some folks also have great success with a diluted solution of fertilizer added to the weekly watering. Obviously, how much food your plant needs will depend on its size, the size of its root ball, and other factors. Just remember that the frequent watering of houseplants (which is necessary because of the pot size) serves to wash nutrients right out of the soil. Since the roots are trapped and unable to "go elsewhere" to look for food (as they would if they were in the ground), they're counting on you for their feeding!



Sunshine

Plants, of course, need light. Check the individual plant tag (or ask one of our New Garden folks) to learn the plant's light requirements . . . or see our information sheets, "Houseplants for Low Light" and "What Do Houseplants Need." A plant that is not



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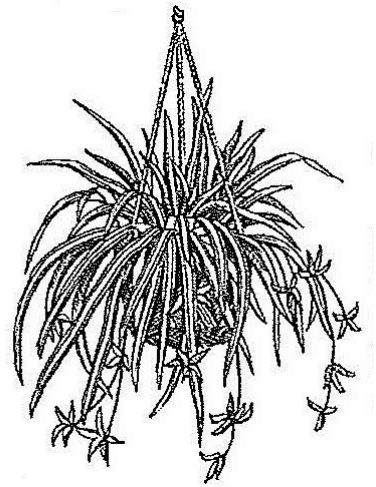
getting enough light will become yellowish and won't grow. No amount of fertilizer will change this. Try moving the plant gradually into a brighter area, or consider adding fluorescent or plant lighting. You have many options here — from grow lights that are a self-contained lighting unit, to special bulbs that can be used in any fixture, to specially designed plant stands with fluorescent light fixtures built in. A note about fluorescent lighting: unlike incandescent bulbs, which work until they burn out, fluorescent bulbs lose their “oomph” over time. If you notice that once-thriving plants are beginning to show signs of inadequate lighting, you may want to think about the age of your fluorescent lighting. It may simply be time to replace the bulb.

One thing to remember is that new research is showing that the same kind of full-spectrum light that is necessary for plant health can also have a tremendous impact on our own personal sense of wellness, especially in the less-sunny winter months. You may find that you can add some full-spectrum incandescent bulbs to your regular lighting fixtures and make everyone happier.

On the other side of the scale, plants exposed to too much direct sunlight can show leaf burns. To remedy this, simply move the plant slightly away from the window or add sheer curtains to filter the sunlight.

This and That

Houseplants do not like rapid changes in their environment! If you want to have your houseplants spend the summer outdoors with you, move them out gradually, from a very sheltered, n-sunny location to a progressively brighter and more exposed area. When fall rolls back around, follow the same step-by- step routine in reverse to acclimate your plants to indoor conditions. Also be sure to check for any insects that may have taken up residence in your plants outdoors, and treat with insecticidal soap if necessary BEFORE they (plants and insects together) come inside. If your houseplants are close to a window in winter, they may actually experience some cold damage. How? Try this: on a cold day, touch the glass in your window. Cold, isn't it, even though surrounding air is comfy. if your plant touches that cold glass, they can be damaged as surely as if they were outside. Just give them a few inches clearance, and they should be fine.



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