

It's Time to Give Houseplants Some Tender Loving Care



Now that the days are getting shorter, spend some time doting on your houseplants. The most important factor in the care of houseplants is matching up a plant's needs to its environment. Light source, light intensity, temperature and total room environment are all crucial to houseplants. Each plant has its own individual cultural requirements, but will tolerate quite a few changes.

All plants require some natural light. Generally, flowering plants prefer stronger light; foliage plants will tolerate very low light conditions. On the whole, it is best to avoid hot direct sunrays for long periods of time. A bleached out area on a plant's leaves indicates too much light. Thin, leggy growth in a plant means not enough light.

Avoid placing plants near direct sources of hot or cold drafts. A sudden change of temperature from doors, windows, furnace ducts, wood stoves or television sets can be detrimental to a plant. Wilting foliage and brown-tipped leaves may be symptoms of a temperature problem.

Fertilize lightly during the active growing season to keep houseplants healthy. Use a water-soluble fertilizer medium strength fertilizer (10-5-5) or compost tea and apply monthly during the spring and summer. During the winter, fertilize lightly every other month to keep the foliage green.

Over-watering is the main problem in the care of houseplants. Water each plant according to its needs, rather than by a regular schedule. Plants in containers with drainage holes can be thoroughly watered, as the excess drains out. If there are no drainage holes, check soil two inches beneath the surface by sticking your finger into the soil to detect whether the soil is still damp before adding water. Plants without drain holes will often have yellowing lower leaves and will gradually decline. Too much water encourages root rot. Move plants to better drained pots if you suspect inadequate drainage.

Insect pests can move in unexpectedly. Check the undersides of leaves regularly, especially on those plants brought in from outdoors. Wash the foliage regularly with a mild soapy solution, taking care to rinse all soap off completely. A fine water spray or wiping the leaves with alcohol-soaked cotton will take care of most insects. Rinse off all the alcohol. Use any chemical insecticide with great care.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact Ken Churches at cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu or (209) 754-6475 with your

agricultural questions. To speak with a Certified Master Gardener: Calaveras (209) 754-2880, Tuolumne (209) 533-5696, Amador (209) 223-6837, El Dorado (530) 621-5543.