

Caring For House Plants

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Most houseplants are hybrids of plant species that grow wild, *somewhere* in the world. A good rule of thumb for keeping your house plants healthy is to try to match the same environment from which they originated. You may not be able to match *every* criteria for your house plant, but every small step you take to ensure the plants comfort will be a giant step towards keeping them healthy. The most important elements needed for indoor plant health are water and light. Most plants have dormant and active cycles, and their watering and fertilizing requirements will differ greatly from season to season.

During periods of active growth, most houseplants should be thoroughly soaked as soon as the soil dries. There are no hard and fast rules to watering, because every situation is different, according to temperatures, and soil types etc. It is better to keep an indoor plant on a slightly dry side than overwatered. More houseplants die from overwatering than any other cause! City water is treated with chemicals for your safety; however, plants do not like chlorine or fluoride, so it is a very good idea to allow the water to sit in an open container for at least 24 hours prior to using it on your houseplants.

The amount and the intensity of the light that the plant receives dictates much of a plant's life cycle. Insufficient light usually manifests itself with paler foliage, lanky growth, and general lack of luster. When this happens, you must do whatever you can to increase the light intensity for that plant. This can usually be rectified by moving the plant closer to the window, or moving it to another room with different light exposure. When you change the light drastically for a houseplant do it gradually to acclimate it to the brighter light.

Many flowering plants and foliage plants actually do better indoors when grown under artificial lights. Plants sense the natural shortening of daylight hours and may go dormant as they would in their natural habitat.

Proper lighting and watering are, by far, the most important criteria for the health of your houseplants, but temperatures and humidity will drastically affect your plants as well. Houseplants, even though they may be of a tropical nature would rather sacrifice a few degrees of temperature in the home than the moisture in the air, which they need to survive. Even though your houseplant may *prefer* a warmer situation, sometimes it comes down to accepting the lesser of two evils... *cool temps or low humidity*. Heated rooms, by nature tend to be dry rooms, especially if they are heated with forced air. If you want your plants to succeed, keep your temperatures as low as possible, while still remaining comfortable for yourself (*never*

below 50°). Generally, tropical plants enjoy a relative humidity of 50%-70% and warm temperatures. Unfortunately, when temperatures in the home rise above 67 degrees F., the humidity drops drastically, so it may be necessary to sacrifice a few degrees of warmth in lieu of an increase in the humidity. Keep in mind that because glass is a poor insulator, the temperature near windows will be considerably colder. At night, be sure to close the drapes or move the plant to a warmer part of the room.

Succulents being the most notable exception, in that they prefer warmer and drier conditions. At temperatures below 60°, African Violets will stop blooming, Poinsettias may drop their leaves, and the leaves of Gardenias may turn yellow. Do a little research into the needs of your favorite houseplants.

Remember when fertilizing house plants that salts will start to cumulate in the soil. This is showed by the crusty material at the top of the soil or along the upper edge of the pot. It is a good idea to flush the soil or replace the soil on a frequent basis so the salts do not build up and this is also a good time to check on the health of the roots.

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