Healthy Houseplant Care

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4/7/2016

Any good gardener knows houseplants can suffer stress at any time of the year. Stress comes when we over water houseplants, keeping soil constantly wet. This can cause root rots that impair a plant's ability to replace moisture loss.

Houseplants also can outgrow their pots. In that case the top of the plant can be out of balance with the amount of soil in which it is growing. Such plants quickly exhaust the supply of water present in the soil and they must be watered more often. However, constant watering sometimes compacts the soil and reduces air space, which, in turn, deprives the roots of adequate oxygen. This can reduce root development and plant growth. Another concern with frequent watering and rapid evaporation rates is accumulation of toxic levels of soluble salts. These salts can interfere with a plant's capacity to pick up moisture and too many salts can first kill leaves and, ultimately, the entire plant. An additional problem of providing too much water is that soil can become "channeled," so water drains too rapidly and fails to thoroughly wet all of the soil in the container.

That prized houseplant is not the result of any magical rite performed by a rare individual with a "green thumb." It is the result of intelligent selection of plant varieties to match the conditions in which they are to grow, or are you using trial and error for determining plant selection? However, here are some suggestions to improve your houseplant growing skills. Determine the conditions, such as light intensities and prevailing temperatures, under which plants are to grow. Determine the types of plants suited to these conditions. Learn as much as you can about specific requirements of the plants you select. Most retail stores can provide this information or the tags on the plants should provide most information. Purchase well-grown, disease-free plants from a reputable dealer. "Bargain" plants often are poor quality because of diseases and insects. They may be in soft and succulent condition because of over-fertilization to force rapid growth.

Use pots of adequate size. If the plant requires watering more often than once every three to four days, a larger container may be needed or the soil mix may be too porous. Check to be sure the plant is not root or pot-bound.

Make sure the container provides adequate drainage. Use clean, sterile pots and pasteurized potting soil. You can purchase pasteurized soil or you can process your own. A soil mixture appropriate for most houseplants contains three parts good loam (soil), one part organic matter (leaf mold, compost or peat) and one part sand. Expose this soil mix to enough heat to destroy any pathogenic microorganisms in the soil. Complete sterilization is not necessary and may even be

harmful. For oven pasteurization, place the soil in a small greenhouse flat or a baking pan to a depth not to exceed four inches. Cover the container with aluminum foil folded over the edges. Maintain the soil at a temperature of 160 degrees F for about 30 minutes. Allow to cool before using.

Wash glazed pottery containers and plastic pots with detergent and hot water. Wash and scrub porous clay pots, then soak in liquid bleach (two tablespoons per gallon of water) for one hour. After disinfecting with bleach, rinse the container free of any bleach solution. This will keep any diseases from spreading to your plants and clean any toxins off the inside of new pots. A little bit of care will provide a healthy good-looking plant.