



2022 – Year of the Peperomia

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Introduced as a houseplant in the 1930s, peperomias are seeing enough of a resurgence that the National Garden Bureau has designated 2022 as the Year of the Peperomia. At least 1000 species of peperomia hail from Central and South America along with the Caribbean. In the wild, they often grow as epiphytes in nooks or crotches of tropical tress or wherever their roots find pockets of decaying organic matter. Peperomias are related to the type of pepper plant that is used to produce the pepper we season our food with. While not poisonous, eating these houseplants is not recommended.

Recent years has seen more and more peperomia species for sale as houseplants. Their diversity is quite amazing. Foliage varies from smooth to textured. Leaves can be tiny or large and heart-shaped. Plants may be green, red, purple or silver and can be solid or variegated. Species often look so different that unless labeled or in bloom, they may not be recognized as peperomias. Plants are grown for their foliage but if given adequate light, they will produce spiky inflorescences in summer. These spindly spikes can just be cut off if deemed unattractive.



A variety of peperomia species. Photo by dmp2022

While all peperomias have some succulent characteristics, only two commonly sold species need to be treated as such. The felted peperomia (*P. incana*) and the baby rubber plant (*P. obtusifolia*) need to be grown in a very well-drained potting media. Either use orchid bark mix or add extra perlite to regular commercial potting mix to improve drainage. Terra cotta pots are preferred as some excess moisture can escape through pot sides. Let the top half of the potting medium dry out between waterings.

In general, peperomias are compact plants, reaching from 6 to 18 inches in height and width, and quite easy to grow. They thrive on benign neglect and bright indirect light. The variegated types keep their patterns more vibrant when kept in brighter light but not direct sunlight. Except during the sunny summer months, an east window is fine for most peperomias. For southern or western exposures, place a sheer curtain between the window and the plant. Peperomias also do well under 12 – 16 hours of artificial lights each day. Since peperomias are tropical plants, they do best when temperatures do not drop below 50 F.

Peperomias are fairly slow growing so repotting is only necessary every few years. When roots start growing out of the pot drainage holes, it is time to report. When doing so, use a pot approximately 2 inches wider and deeper than the last one so say go from a 6-inch diameter pot to an 8-inch one. These plants do best if pot bound.

They also do not require much fertilizer. Feed plants when actively growing in the spring with a half strength liquid fertilizer containing micronutrients twice a month from March through June. Spring is also the time to give leggy plants a bit of a pruning. This tidies them up and encourages branching but also provides cuttings that are not very difficult to root.

To root stem cuttings, with clean scissors or pruners, snip off a 2 to 3 inch piece of stem with at least 2 sets of leaves. Make the cut about a quarter inch below the second set of leaves and remove those bottom leaves before sticking the stem in a small pot with moistened potting medium. Place the pot in a clear plastic bag in a warm area with bright light. The bag will act like a mini-greenhouse, keeping moisture in and the humidity high. Make sure the potting medium stays moist and roots should form in a few weeks.

While it seems like watering houseplants would be a breeze, in fact overwatering is the number one killer of houseplants. Since peperomias are either succulents or succulent like, do not over water. Stick your finger in the pot and feel that the top inch or so is dry before watering. Then water thoroughly and let drain. Empty any standing water in the saucer. How often to water really does depend on the size of the plant, size of the pot and the temperature the plant is kept so check plants frequently at first and typically you will find they only need watering once every week or so.

In peperomias, overwatering symptoms often occur as yellowing or curling leaves, wilting stems, and root rots. Also, fungus gnats may become a problem if potting mixes are kept too wet. Reduce watering as soon as any of these symptoms are noticed and if the mix is really wet,

remove the plant from the pot, discard the potting mix, wash the roots, remove any black, mushy or dead ones and repot in a clean pot with new mix.

Once you bring home one peperomia and see what an attractive, easy to care for plant it is, you will need a lot of willpower to resist the urge to add more of these great plants to your household. For information on growing peperomias or if you have any other gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.ladybug.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.