



Houseplant Hints

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

While it's still too cold and wet to do much with the plants outside your home, it is a perfect time to take a good look at your houseplants. Unless you happen to have fluorescent lights, most plants slow down their rate of growth during the winter in response to reduced light and often times, cooler indoor temperatures.

A slower growing plant requires less nutrients. Some plants can be fertilized lightly about once a month. Most prefer to abstain until active growth begins, usually in late March or early April.

A slower growing plant also uses less water. Many houseplants die because they are over watered. Indications that your plant may be receiving too much water may include wilt, stunted growth and soft, shriveled stems. Lower leaves may turn yellow or drop off. Flower buds may also fall off before opening or remain closed. It is best not to rely on a fixed schedule when watering houseplants, especially this time of year. Rather, stick your finger an inch or two down in the pot and feel if the soil is moist. When in doubt, don't water. Some plants like to dry out between waterings while others favor remaining evenly moist. Read up on your particular plants to find out their preferences.



Wilted Peace Lily- water moderately and see how plant responds. Photo by dmp, 2021.

Colder temperatures near doors and windows can also cause problems. If your plant receives an arctic blast each time the door is opened, move it to another spot. Do not allow the foliage to touch windowpanes as it can freeze causing death or damage to the tissue. Some plants cannot abide being exposed to cold temperatures. African violets, for example, will become limp and often die if left on a too cold windowsill. A number of plants will tolerate 50 to 55 degree F temperatures; some of the more common being azaleas, cast iron plants, English ivies, gold dust plants, Norfolk Island pines, many dracaenas, ferns, palms, primroses, cacti and freesias.

It is also not a good idea to place plants close to a heat source such as a radiator or wood burning stove. Both the soil and plant's leaves can dry out very quickly possible causing irreversible damage.

As both the intensity and duration of light decrease during the winter months, many plants that do well in north and east windows over the summer can tolerate and even welcome a sunny southerly or westerly exposure during this time of year. Give your plants a quarter turn each week as they will lean toward the light eventually giving a lopsided appearance.

Houseplants will appreciate a good grooming. Trim off dead or dying leaves and pinch leggy growth. Wipe healthy leaves with a soft, damp cloth to remove any dust or debris. This is important because dusty leaves can receive up to 25 percent less light than clean ones, and during these low light winter months your plants need all the light they can get. Avoid using leaf polishes on the foliage because it will clog the pores.

Check plants for unwelcome insect pests. Treat immediately before a real problem develops.

If you need a few more houseplants to add a little cheer during these dreary winter months – or even if you don't – spend a wintry afternoon visiting a greenhouse or two. The warm, tropical atmosphere will revive your spirits and a new plant can bring a breath of spring into your home.

For questions on selecting and caring for houseplants or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.