



UConn Home & Garden Education Center

TURNING A HOUSEPLANT INTO A HOMEPLANT

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Plants, like people, have little nuances about them that make them happy and able to thrive. Some people turn the A/C all the way down till they can see their breath, and others like it warm with a bit of sweat on their brow. Plants can be picky in the same way; the only difference is in their way of telling us. Now unless you've heard a plant talking to you, they have a way of telling us they're unhappy by exhibiting sad and depressing symptoms or just outright dying. Here are some helpful tidbits that have helped me and my houseplants.

Water: very basic, but overwatering is a very common cause of houseplant decline. Succulents for example, can go for weeks without watering, whereas tropical plants prefer moist soil. Using a saucer below your pot and filling that saucer with water is a good way to water moisture loving plants from below. After an hour or so, dump the remaining water. This helps ensure that the soil isn't oversaturated with the roots drowning in water, which would lead to root rot. Self-watering pots and self-watering bulbs are really a handy way of keeping up with your plants' watering needs, while reducing the amount of work for yourself. This is also very useful while you are away from home.



African violet. Photo by dmp2006

Humidity: this is especially important for any tropical houseplants you may have. If you're like me, you can't resist the magnificence of a tropical houseplant. Usually adored for their beautiful, often glossy foliage, they really make a statement in any household. Orchids, ferns, palms, philodendrons, monsteras, and bromeliads are some of the common ones you will encounter. These tropicals usually demand a microclimate of around 60-80% humidity, while homes usually

stay within 30-40% humidity. A simple hygrometer, or device that measures water vapor in the air, is a good a cheap tool that can be placed near your tropical friends. Once you know the general humidity around your plants, you can then take different approaches to improving their conditions.

The easiest way of increasing humidity for your plants is to group them together. A humidifier or misting is a more direct approach. Remember, some plants such as African violets, should avoid having water come in contact with their leaves to prevent water-soaked lesions.

Terrariums are useful for smaller plants that need a higher amount of humidity than they can find normally in the household. They work by maintaining a closed environment that is useful for keeping plant transpiration within the terrarium. Something as simple as a fish tank with a lid can give some plants a boost.

Light: this one can be a bit trickier because not all households have the sunlight requirements that some of their plants need. This can be limited by the direction which the windows face, or if there are any sources of shade blocking sunlight from outside. Consider whether your plants need direct or indirect sunlight. Here in Connecticut, a south facing window is good for a steady amount of direct sunlight, whereas a north facing window is good if less light is needed. Should windows be your limiting factor, consider purchasing grow lights to use around your plant area. LEDs, or light emitting diodes, are an energy efficient solution that can be used in a variety of ways. Some come with plant stakes to place in the pots directly to keep the light over the target plant, while others can be placed under cabinets and over counters.

Another thing to consider is that moving plants can make them unhappy. The changes in light, humidity, and temperature can stress a plant to a point where it can show signs of decline. Choosing the right plant for your home is important. Consider a plant's cultural requirements as well as the amount of care that you can provide the plant. Sometimes your home environment is not a good match for the plant you have in mind.

Despite one's best attempts, sometimes houseplants just die. This happens to all of us, even experts and professionals in horticulture. Part of becoming better plant parents is learning through trial and error.

If you have questions about caring or selecting houseplants or if you have any other gardening questions, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education at (877) 486-6271 or www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or your local Cooperative Extension Center.