

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



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Management Tips to Keep Houseplants Thriving
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The chilly fall weather reduces my desire to go outside and work in the landscape. Instead, I turn to enjoying houseplants. Special care is needed to keep them thriving.

Check the leaves of the plants for insects. Check stems and undersides of leaves for signs of insect pests such as aphids and scale. Typically, their presence is first noticed on the leaves when feeling the sticky honeydew, which is a sugary liquid waste. Broadleaved plants can be washed with soapy water and a soft brush or cloth to remove or kill insects that stay on the plant. Use 1 teaspoon of mild detergent or soap per gallon of water. Although this method is time-consuming, it may be the best alternative to insecticide sprays. Repeat washing if the infestation reappears.

Another common insect pest is the spider mite. These tiny insects make noticeable webs when the population is high. Wash spider mites off plants with a shower of tepid water every three to four days.

During the winter, plants rest or grow less because of less light, so overwatering is a common problem. The temperature and humidity in the room also affect the amount of water

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needed. Before watering, check the soil with your finger to a depth of about an inch. If the soil is dry, water it thoroughly. If the soil is wet, don't water. Some plants like the soil constantly moist, while others need to go dry before watering again. Check each plant's requirements to determine when to water. Watering a plant a little each day causes salt build-up from fertilizer and results in poor root development.

Reduce the risk of over-watering plants by growing them in containers with drainage holes, which allow excess water to drain. Pour off extra water that remains in a container under the plant or fill it with pebbles to collect the water and keep the pot high and dry. Another tip is to use an unglazed clay pot, which allows soil to dry out faster in the container.

On the other hand, underwatering can cause leaf edges to turn brown. Wilted and limp leaves may mean the soil is too dry. Check soil moisture often. It is best to water a plant before it wilts to avoid injuring it.

Pot-bound houseplants are more susceptible to drying out. The soil in a pot-bound houseplant is filled with roots, reducing the amount of water the soil can hold. Increase the watering frequency or repot the plant into a container one or two inches larger in diameter, which reduces the need for water. Check the soil before watering, because it will be easy to over-water the plant due to the new volume of soil added.

Humidity is lower indoors, especially in winter. Watch for the drying effect of heated air that blows from the furnace. Plants can be placed on a tray of pebbles with water, or an air humidifier or vaporizer can be used to increase the humidity.

Over-fertilizing causes leaf browning. In general, fertilize plants every one to three months with a water-soluble fertilizer. Fertilize plants more often when they are rapidly

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growing. Less fertilizer is needed when it is not rapidly growing. Check the fertilizer label and the needs of the plant to develop a schedule. A water-soluble, complete fertilizer containing nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium is recommended for most houseplants.

Since the days are shorter and sunlight is weaker in the winter, place the plants in the sunniest locations possible indoors. If relocating plants to areas with direct sun, acclimate them by moving them closer to the location over several days to avoid burning the leaves. Rotate plants to prevent them from becoming one-sided as they lean toward the light. If natural light is limited, consider using grow lights. LED lights are energy-efficient and effective.

For more information about growing houseplants, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

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Annette's Tip:

To help prevent problems with diseases on houseplants, avoid wetting the foliage when watering, use well-drained potting soil, and allow air circulation around the plant. Leaves with disease should be removed from the plant.