



Winter Care of Houseplants

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You probably have some captive plants sitting around your home that could use a little consideration.

Though they are sheltered from extreme fluctuations of temperatures experienced by their in-ground brethren, houseplants are not immune to winter woes. Most houseplants experience a period of slowed growth and some become dormant during this time. Nonetheless, they require maintenance and conservation to thrive.

Generally, fertilizer should not be applied during this season. Watering, too, can be reduced with the admonition to check soil moisture levels on a regular schedule. Home heaters reduce the amount of humidity in the air causing houseplants to use more water than one might think. Feel the soil with your finger once or twice a week. If the soil is cool, it should be sufficiently moist; if the soil is warm and dry, the plant needs to be watered.

The very heaters that make our homes cozy also reduce the humidity, resulting in warm dry air that can cause some problems. For people, too low humidity can contribute to overly dry skin and even nosebleeds. Indicators that your plants are stressed from low humidity and/or insufficient watering include brown leaf tips, yellowing leaves, bud drop, wilting, shriveling and increased pest infestation.

A humidifier can improve the quality of the air inside the home, or you can place potted plants on a tray of wet pebbles. Make certain the pot sits above the water line and protect any furniture surfaces from possible damage. As the water evaporates upward, it creates a more humid micro-climate around the plants. Grouping plants together also contributes to a favorable environment as the moisture that evaporates from one benefits another.

The quality of natural light in the winter months seems "thinner," due in part to the fact that the days are shorter. Because the Earth's axis of rotation is at an angle inclined away from the sun, its rays strike our hemisphere from a lower, more horizontal direction than they do in summer, thus it's also cooler.

Houseplants should be placed in the brightest natural light available, ideally by a window that faces south. Care should be taken to prevent foliage from coming in contact with the cold window panes. Moreover, plants should be protected from chilly drafts as well as from heater vents. Signs of damage from frostbite or heat include wilting and blackened leaves.

Check for insect infestation, which is generally not a large cold-weather problem but could prove troublesome. Pest such as mealybugs, spider mites, aphids and white flies can proliferate in the dry, warm air inside the house. A good way to control pests while at the same time providing moisture is to give your houseplants a shower every couple of weeks. Spray leaves, top and bottom, to wash off any critters that might be lurking.

Prune spindly growth and pinch back plants to keep them tidy, full and handsome.

With a little TLC, your houseplants will thrive and so will you. According to several medical studies, houseplants can help you feel calmer and more optimistic, reduce fatigue, enhance creativity, increase productivity and purify the air.



Many people consider the African violet to be one of the more difficult houseplants to grow. However, with particular attention to watering regularly and providing adequate light, the violet can provide a spectacular spot of color through the dreariest of winter days.