

Caring for Your Houseplants Through the Winter

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Many of us have houseplants or prized plants that we like to overwinter in our homes. However, keeping plants healthy indoors thru the winter can be a difficult task unless provided with the ideal environment, like a greenhouse. Most of us however don't have a greenhouse and may not even have a good south facing window. Nevertheless, there are techniques to keep plants healthy and thriving during the winter.

There are several reasons why keeping plants healthy during the winter may be difficult. Day length, light intensity, and humidity are the three major environmental differences. Many plants are effected by day length and may be triggered to go dormant, stop growing, or grow extremely slowly; thus requiring different management then would be expected under the long days of summer. Light intensity is another factor that affects plant growth in the winter. During the winter at northern latitudes light intensity is greatly reduced. Most flowering plants require a high intensity of light and during the winter this is just not available. For those plants needing long days and good light intensity finding a sunny window will help but will unlikely fulfill the plant's needs. Artificial lighting can be used to supplement, cool white fluourescent bulbs are a good choice for providing supplemental light. Light bulbs should be placed 6 – 12 inches from the plant and should be on for 12-16 hours a day. Putting the light on a timer greatly helps and eliminates one thing to remember.

Humidity is another environmental factor that is drastically different in the winter versus other times of the year. The cold air in the winter has little capacity to hold moisture and when that air is heated up as it is in most houses the relative humidity drops. The extreme dry air is unsuitable for many houseplants since most are tropical plants which are adapted to growing in high humidity year round. To create a more humid environment you can group plants closely together or put the plants in a tray filled with gravel and water, keep the water level below the top of the gravel so that the potted planted cannot absorb water from the tray, a humidifier will also work.

To find the best locations in your house for keeping plants healthy during the winter there a few factors to keep in mind. Most houseplants have a low tolerance level to drafts and some species can actually suffer injury when temperatures are below 50F. Avoiding areas that are extremely drafty is key; avoid areas near doorways that open to the outside or drafty doors and windows. If your windows get frosted on the inside on cold nights you can assume that right up close to the window is not appropriate, never have a plant so close to a window that the foliage is pressed against the window. Hot air can also be an issue so avoid placing plants in direct line of hot air vents or next to radiators, the constant blowing of warm air can cause significant water loss thru transpiration. A sunny window is best during the winter even for foliage plants just remember to move low light loving plants before the spring when days get longer and the light more intense.

Watering of plants during the winter can be tough to evaluate, and one of the most common problems is over-watering. Because of the low light levels and short days plants tend to use far less water than at other times of the year. Be careful to water only when needed, this varies from species to species but for the most part plants should be water when the pot feels light to pick up or soil feels dry to the touch. Water the plant to its full capacity and make sure not to allow it to sit in a tray that retains water. Over-watering makes plants susceptible to root rot, which will eventually kill the plant. One symptom of root rot is a wilting plant even though the soil is moist. If this happens, pop the plant out of the pot as carefully as possible and check the roots. Roots should look healthy and white, if they are brown or black and fall apart easily this is a sign of root rot. Under watering is rarely a problem but can occasionally occur when plants are left in extremely warm windows or if placed in front of a hot air vent.

Over fertilizing, like over watering, is also a common problem, with the slow growth during winter the plant has little need to be fertilized some plants are best not fertilized at all during the winter. Signs of over fertilizing include salt like residues on the soil surface or browning or burning of the outer leaf margins on foliage. Insect pests can also show up on houseplants during the winter, the most common pest to see are spidermites, mealybugs and scales. Spidermites thrive in hot dry situations which are common indoors during the winter. These tiny mites are hard to see with the naked eye; however, the symptoms they cause are not and include stippling or silvering of foliage. Mealybugs and scales can often be noticed by a sticky substance known as honeydew that they excrete; this sticky substance will usually be found on the floor, pot, or on the foliage below the insects. Upon further inspection cottony like white tufts will be found when you have mealybugs and if you have scale you will typically find tiny brownish encrustations along leaf veins, stems and petioles.

By early March, the days are getting significantly longer and the light intensity getting stronger. Even though plants outside may still be buried deep in snow houseplants will start resuming more active growth and one can resume more normal fertilizing and watering routines. For additional information check out our website <http://extension.unh.edu/> or contact Russell Norton at (603) 447-3834.

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