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# Common Houseplant Problems During the Winter Months

## Why do houseplants seem to have more problems during the winter months?

There is less sunlight (in both hours and intensity).

The air in our homes is drier, and most houseplants are tropical — preferring humid conditions.

## What are some of the most common houseplant problems?

- **Over-watering**

Over-watering causes root rot and the plant wilts. In response, we continue to water, thus adding to the problem (you can check for root rot by removing the plant from the pot and examining the roots: firm, white roots are healthy; brown, tan or gray roots are rotted).

- **Under-watering**

Usually a problem if the plant is in a southern window or if it is too close to a heat source.

- **Over-fertilization**

Plants need less fertilization in the winter months (fertilizer can be greatly reduced or even eliminated during the winter months). Often noticed as a tip burn on the leaves, soluble salt build-up (excess fertilizer) may be noticeable on the soil surface, around the drainage holes at the bottom of the pot, or on the outside of a clay pot.

- **Insects**

### **Mealybugs and scale insects** (also **whiteflies** and **aphids**)

The first symptom is usually a clear sticky substance called honeydew on the surface of the leaves or on the floor or furniture under the infested plant.

### **Spider mites**

These insects often become more troublesome when the air in the home is hot and dry. The upper surface of the leaves may appear stippled or silvery. The lower surface appears “dirty” with cast exoskeletons and excrement.

## What steps can be taken to avoid environmental problems?

- Water only when necessary, not on a regular schedule – test the soil with your finger.
- Water thoroughly – until the water drains freely out of the bottom of the pot.
- Move plants to a sunnier window (but avoid contact with windowpanes), or provide artificial light.
- To increase the humidity, use a humidifier, or group the plants closely together.

**What are some of the ways to manage insect pests on houseplants?**

Mealybugs can be wiped off with a Q-tip dipped in alcohol.

The plants can be sprayed with water in the sink or shower to wash-off the insects.

Mites can be discouraged by frequently misting the plants.

*original fact sheet by Cheryl Smith, UNH Extension Plant Health Specialist; reformatted 3/01*

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