

HOUSEPLANT RENEWAL

Tips and information from Jennifer Brennan

The charm of houseplants is universal, but many are allowed to die needlessly. Forget about 'green thumbs'. Anyone can grow the more popular types and make them look attractive. If your plants look sickly and unattractive; it is a matter of poor choice, incorrect upkeep or lack of knowledge about care requirements. This discussion will tell you the secrets of success and show you the solutions to the special problems you are likely to find.

I. THE TEN GOLDEN RULES

1. Don't drown them - roots need air as well as water, keeping the medium soaked at all times means certain death for most plants. See proper watering.
2. Give them a rest - nearly all plants need a rest in winter, which means less water, less fertilizer and less heat than during the active growing season. See dormant period.
3. Accept the loss of 'Temporary' plants - some popular gift plants will die down in a couple of weeks; you have done nothing wrong - these types are 'flowering pot plants' which are only temporary residents. Enjoy them as long-lived cut flowers.
4. Give them extra humidity - the atmosphere of a centrally-heated room in winter is as dry as desert air; add humidity for success. See methods to increase humidity.
5. Treat trouble promptly - trouble will strike whether you are an expert or a beginner. One or two scale insects or mealy bugs are easily picked off, an infestation may be incurable. Overwatering is not fatal at first, but if prolonged will kill. Learn to recognize the early signs of trouble. See trouble shooting.
6. Group them together - nearly all plants look better and grow better when grouped together due to increased humidity.
7. Learn to repot - after a year or two many plants outgrow their containers, deplete the nutritional value of the potting medium or require frequent watering. In most cases, the plant just needs to be repotted into a larger container or fresh potting medium. See learn how to repot.
8. Choose wisely - the plant must be able to survive in the home you provide for it; even an expert can not make a shade-lover survive in a sunny window. Understand the light conditions of the location.
9. Have the proper tools - basics include a watering can with a long, narrow spout, a reputable brand of potting medium, pots with drainage, drip or humidity trays, liquid fertilizer, safe pest killer, soft sponge and small sized pruning shears.
10. Learn about the plants specific needs - when you try to match a plant's natural growing conditions the success rate increases and the life of the plant is extended. See examples of good reference books or get a plant fact sheet.

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II. CLASSIFICATION OF HOUSEPLANTS

- A. Foliage House Plants
- B. Flowering House Plants
- C. Flowering Pot Plants
- D. Cacti

III. LIGHT - the most important factor in a successful indoor garden is light. All plants need light so plan your plants around your windows.

- A. SOUTH - support sun-loving flowering plants
- B. EAST AND WEST - receive half-day sun, provides bright light but not direct sun.
- C. NORTH - gets the least amount of light, supports foliage plants only
- D. FACTORS that affect amount of light
 - 1. Shade trees
 - 2. Buildings or foundation plants
 - 3. Reflection of light from water or concrete
- E. ENHANCE THE QUALITY OF LIGHT
 - 1. Wash the window panes
 - 2. Wake early and open curtains
 - 3. Position plants close to panes
 - 4. Trim obstructing foundation plants or remove lower limbs of trees
- F. ARTIFICIAL LIGHT - even in the brightest window, the light available indoors is only a fraction of the wattage of direct sunlight
 - 1. Fluorescent tubes - warm white and cool white for full spectrum
 - 2. Plant lights – broad spectrum
 - 3. 12-14 hours per day - but never 24 hours per day (at most 16 hours for succulents and some orchids)

IV. PROPER WATERING TECHNIQUE

- A. ALWAYS HAVE DRAINAGE IN THE PERMANENT POT
- B. Thorough but infrequent watering in best
- C. At least once a month 'leach' the pot to prevent mineral build-up
- D. Use the best water indicator available - your finger.
- E. Know the quality of your water.

V. DORMANT PERIOD

- A. Shorter day-length and lower light intensity trigger plants to go into a dormant period resulting in slower growth and hence less need for fertilizer and water.
- B. Keep plants cooler when light levels are lower to prevent stretching for light.
- C. Stop fertilizing from the end of October to the end of February.
- D. Do not replot until right before the plant goes into the active growth period.

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VI. INCREASE HUMIDITY

- A. Humidifier
- B. Humidity trays or drip trays
- C. Gravel trays to hold water
- D. Misting

VII. TROUBLE SHOOTING

- A. Use I.P.M. (integrated pest management) scouting methods
- B. Recognize common insects
 - 1. Aphid - try a stream of cold water; or pyrethrum or resmethrin spray
 - 2. Cyclamen mite - use systemic insecticide or destroy plant
 - 3. Mealy bug - isopropyl alcohol on a Q-tip; or pyrethrum or resmethrin
 - 4. Scale - horticultural (paraffinic) oil; NOT dormant or Volck oil or systemic
 - 5. Fungus gnat - let soil dry out, use sticky tape, or spray pyrethrum or resmethrin spray onto soil, systemic granules or nematodes
 - 6. Red spider mite - pyrethrum or resmethrin spray and/or sulfur spray
 - 7. Whitefly - systemic granules and sticky yellow tapes; or take plant outside in warm weather & spray with a contact or liquid systemic insecticide.
 - 8. Slugs or snails - use Sluggo iron phosphate granules on soil surface
 - 9. Millipedes - use Sluggo with Spinosad on soil surface
- C. Start control with the least toxic control and proceed to stronger controls based on population size
 - 1. First use cold water to wash pests away
 - 2. Next use insecticidal soap
 - 3. Next use Horticultural oils
 - 4. Next use plant derived pesticides
 - 5. Finally use systemic chemicals and/or chemical sprays.
- D. Use I.P.M. controls - apply the least amount of chemicals at the most beneficial time to control the largest amount of pest population.
- E. Recognize diseases - the appearance of disease is usually a sign of poor growing conditions.
 - 1. Speedy action is essential - cut out diseased area as soon as it is seen
 - 2. Correct cultural problem
 - 3. Apply fungicide, whether chemical, elemental or organic
 - 4. Most common diseases
 - a. Anthracnose - use a garden fungicide (sulfur), and keep plant dry after 3:00 P.M.
 - b. Botrytis leaf or petal spotting - use a garden fungicide, and keep plants dry after 3:00 P.M.

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4. Most common diseases (cont.)
 - c. Damping off - top dress soil with finely shredded sphagnum moss or use sulfur spray.
 - d. Edema (corky scab) - keep plants warmer at night or lower humidity at night
 - e. Root rot - if disease is just starting, remove diseased roots and keep soil on the dry side, otherwise discard plant
 - f. Sooty mold - remove insect pest producing 'honeydew'
 - g. Crown and stem rot - use fungicide prior to planting
 - h. Leaf spot - keep soil a little drier for 2-3 weeks, remove damaged part of leaf
 - i. Powdery mildew - use a garden fungicide, keep plant dry after 3:00 P.M.
 - j. Rust - use fungicide, reduce humidity and keep plant dry after 3:00 P.M.
 - k. Virus - discard plant

VIII. REPOTTING - most house plants thrive best in pots which appear to be too small for the amount of leaf and stem present. It is a mistake to repot into a larger pot unless the plant is definitely 'pot-bound'

A. Signs of 'Pot-Bound':

1. Stem and leaf growth very slow even when the plant is fed regularly in the spring and summer
2. Soil dries out quickly, so frequent watering is required
3. Roots growing through the drainage hole.
4. Remove the pot from the root ball to view roots growing around the outside of the root ball, so that not much soil is visible.

B. Technique

1. Water plant thoroughly
2. One hour later, remove it from the original pot by running a knife around the edge and gently knocking the root ball out of the pot.
3. Carefully tease out some of the matted roots, and remove any rotten roots
4. Place plant so that it will grow at the same level at which it was growing in the original pot.
5. Gradually fill around the root ball with potting soil that has been dampened.
6. Firm the potting soil with the thumbs, and tap the pot on the table to settle the medium and to make sure there are no air pockets.
7. Water thoroughly, so that all the medium is moist and until water drains out of the bottom of the pot.
8. Place the plant in the shade for about a week, misting daily to avoid water stress.
9. Place plant in normal growing area and treat normally.



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IX. HOUSEPLANT REFERENCE BOOKS

- * Spectacular Container Plants, Byron E. Martin and Laurelyn G. Martin, Willow Creek Press, Minocqua, Wisconsin 2001
- * The Houseplant Expert, Dr. D. G. Hessayon, DBI Publications, Wartham Cross, England 1991
- * Tropica, Alfred Byrd Graf, Roehrs Company, East Rutherford, N.J. 1981
- * The American Horticultural Society, A-Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants, Christopher Brickell and Judith Zuk, DK Publishing, N.Y., N.Y. 1996