

Care for your Houseplants this Winter

Diana Alfuth, Horticulture Educator, UW-Extension
Pierce & St. Croix Counties

Lush, green houseplants can help brighten our spirits on cold, winter days. Besides adding beauty and being an integral part of interior decoration, houseplants help clean our indoor air of toxins, and help satisfy the gardening urge for people who can't have outdoor gardens or who can't wait for the start of next year's outdoor growing season. Indoor gardening can be very simple, or as challenging as the most dedicated gardener desires.

Because we are located so far north, we have drastic seasonal fluctuations not only in temperatures, but in the duration and intensity of daylight. To keep houseplants healthy, we must consider light, temperature, water, humidity and nutrient requirements, all of which are interrelated.

Start by choosing plants that are adapted to your home environment and the amount of light you have. All plants need light to conduct photosynthesis, which creates the food (sugars) needed by the plant to grow. In winter, we have fewer hours of daylight and the sun's lower angle causes winter light to be less intense. Add to that the fact that we have more cloudy days in winter, and light becomes the most limiting factor to healthy plant growth indoors.

It may help to move your houseplants closer to a bright, south window for winter. Be sure to move them back before late spring and summer, or leaves of shade-loving plants may sunburn as the sun becomes more intense.

If you've summered your houseplants outside on your deck or patio and brought them back in for winter, be prepared for some initial leaf drop. Even if your plants are in the shade outside, the light is still brighter than it is in most houses. Some plants will shed their summer leaves and grow new leaves that are thinner and more able to survive in lower light levels.

The amount of water a houseplant needs is dependent on the amount of light the plant receives, the humidity, the potting soil, and the room temperature. A plant growing actively in good light will need more moisture than one growing slowly in minimal light. Higher temperatures and lower humidity also increase the need for water.

Water only when the soil surface feels dry ½ inch deep. Always water thoroughly until water comes through the pot's drain holes, but do not let the plant sit in a saucer full of water. Sometimes it will take 4 days to become dry, and other times it will take 10 days. More houseplants die from overwatering, which suffocates roots

and allows root rot fungi to set in, than from underwatering. Plants often develop brown leaf tips when soil is allowed to get too dry.

Temperature is another consideration that affects the happiness of your houseplants. Most plants prefer days between 65 and 75 degrees F, with nights about 10 degrees cooler. The more light a plant has, the higher temperatures it can tolerate. High temperatures and low light produce spindly, weak, yellowish plants.

Keep plants out of cold, drafty locations such as entryways where cold air blasts the plant when doors are opened. Also avoid hot, dry areas such as near heat vents.

Once the indoor heating season begins, our homes are usually quite dry. Low humidity increases the amount of moisture lost through houseplant leaves, which may increase the amount of watering necessary. Low humidity also favors damaging spider mites, which seem to explode indoors in winter. These mites prefer warm, dry conditions. Using room humidifiers and grouping plants together can increase humidity and make conditions less favorable to mites. Setting pots above (not in) a tray of water also increases surrounding humidity. Place decorative rocks or glass marbles in a tray, and fill the tray with water to just below the top of the rocks, then set the plants on top of the rocks. Misting plants raises humidity for only a very short time.

Be careful not to over-fertilize your houseplants during winter in an attempt to encourage vigorous growth. Plants manufacture their own true food (carbohydrates) during photosynthesis, and fertilizer should be thought of as a vitamin supplement. During the winter, when light levels are low and photosynthesis slows, plants won't do much growing and therefore have little need for fertilizer. Wait until late winter (late February or early March) to fertilize, when increased light levels cause plants to increase growth.

Always mix fertilizers at $\frac{1}{2}$ the rate recommended on the label. Fertilizers can easily build up in houseplant containers and cause browned leaf tips and burned roots. This can result in stunted growth, or root rot fungi can move in and cause plant death. Watering thoroughly, until water runs out of the drainage hole, helps prevent soluble salts from fertilizers from building up—just be sure to empty the saucer so that the water and soluble salts don't wick back into the soil.

Finally, keep your plants' leaves clean. Dust builds up on houseplants and blocks the already low light, reducing photosynthesis even more. Give your houseplants a regular sponge bath or shower. Large plants can be placed under the shower for a few minutes to wash dust and dirt off leaves. Place tinfoil over the pot to keep soil from splashing out. Smaller plants can be treated the same way in your kitchen sink, using the hand sprayer or a spray bottle.

Avoid using leaf shine products. The shiny surface reflects light away from the leaf, and makes leaves sticky, allowing them to collect even more dust and dirt. Also, keep a close eye out for insect pests indoors, especially spider mites and mealy bugs, and treat accordingly. Spider mites can get out of hand quickly and do a lot of damage by sucking the juices out of the plants.

When winter's over, you will be anxious to get back outside, and so will your houseplants! Summering them in a protected outdoor spot will invigorate them and improve their lush, full appearance.