

# Houseplants

UCCE Stanislaus County

## CHOOSING A HOUSEPLANT

Houseplants come in many shapes and sizes and may reduce psychological and physiological stress. Before purchasing, inspect plants carefully and choose only healthy, vigorous and pest-free specimens. Page 4 of this publication has a list of houseplants that are commonly found at nurseries and garden centers.

## HOUSEPLANT LOCALE

Most houseplants require a bright, sunny location with indirect light that comes through a window or skylight. Be aware that south-facing windows may allow too much light and cause leaf scorch. For homes or offices with poor lighting, there are several houseplants from which to choose. These choices are listed on page 4 of this publication. Houseplants are not adapted to deal with direct sunlight, and within a few hours or days (depending on the temperature), leaf scorch and plant death will most likely occur.

Keep houseplants away from areas that may be drafty, such as near doors or heating or cooling vents.

## HOUSEPLANT CARE

Care of most indoor houseplants consists of watering, pruning, grooming and fertilizing plants. Follow these instructions to keep your houseplant healthy.

### *Watering: tap vs. bottled*

Collected rainwater or distilled water is the best for houseplants. Tap water may contain high levels of salts that is harmful. If your plant's leaves are brown and dry at the tips and margins, this may be a sign of salt buildup. Fertilizers can also add to this problem.

To flush out salts, set your plant in a sink. Allow water to slowly saturate the soil and drain. Repeat several times. This process helps flush out excess salts that may have accumulated in the soil.

The amount of water house plants require depends on the temperature of your home or office. Water when soil is dry and avoid keeping plants too wet, as this can lead to insect and disease problems.

### *Fertilizer*

Newly purchased plants should not be fertilized for at least 6 weeks after you bring them home. After 6 weeks, feed plants with a balanced houseplant food that is water soluble. To get houseplants to bloom, use a fertilizer high in phosphorus from spring through summer. Never fertilize a houseplant that has been stressed by drought. Wait until a regular watering schedule is established, then fertilize.

### *Re-potting*

Plants with crowded roots should be replanted into a pot no more than two inches larger than the previous one. Use fresh potting mix and water thoroughly. Add more soil if needed.

Some plants, such as ferns, may be "pot-bound" at the time of purchase. These plants dry out just a day or two after watering, indicating the roots do not have enough soil space. If this occurs, re-pot your plant into a new container.

*Soil and Containers* Houseplants should be planted in containers using a good quality potting mix. Avoid potting mixes that contain peat moss which tends to keep soil too wet.

Plant your houseplant directly into a decorative pot or choose a slightly smaller plastic pot that fits inside. The houseplant container should have holes to allow for adequate drainage. If not, drill several 1/8" holes in the bottom.

### *Grooming*

Give your houseplant a "shower" every few weeks or gently wipe leaves with a damp cloth. This will help reduce any pests that may build up on the leaves. Do not use products that create a glossy finish as they block their pores.

All plants need a good "hair cut" once in a while. Use sharp scissors to trim leaves that have browned edges. Remember that some leaf shed in houseplants is normal. Inspect old leaves for signs of pests and disease.



### *Indoor Pests*

Pests common to houseplants include fungus gnats, spider mites, mealybugs and scale. Stressed plants are more likely to fall victim to pests and disease than healthy plants. Proper care is required to avoid most infestations.

Fungus gnats fly around plants when disturbed and can be an annoyance. They thrive in moist conditions. To get rid of them, allow your houseplants' soil mix to dry out in between watering.

### *Houseplant Safety*

Some houseplants are considered toxic. The sap in these plants contains chemical substances that may produce an allergic reaction in humans and animals. The amount of material ingested and the weight of the person or animal must be taken into account.

A common houseplant that may cause problems in both humans and pets is the dieffenbachia or "dumb cane." The sap of this plant has been known to cause swelling of the tongue and throat, symptoms which may interfere with breathing.

Most pets may chew on the leaf or stem of a houseplant, but then find the taste bitter and avoid it in the future. If the pet does consume part of the plant, the reaction may be nausea or vomiting. Call your veterinarian if a pet is not eating properly and dieffenbachia or other plant consumption is suspected. The guide on page 4 mentions plants known to cause mouth irritation, vomiting, and nausea.

Keep houseplants out of the reach of young children and pets. If you suspect a family member may have chewed or swallowed an unknown plant or part of a plant known to cause allergic reactions in humans, call Poison Control at 1-800-222-1222. Be prepared to describe the plant.

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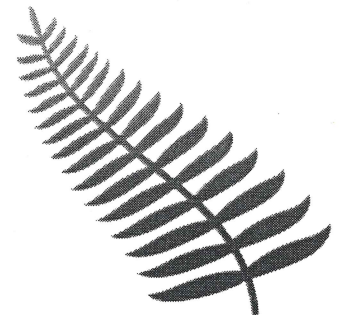
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# Houseplants for the Home or Office

Houseplant Care

E = Easy, M = Moderate, D = Difficult

Anthurium	<b>M</b> ; bright to moderate light needed for bloom; set plant on tray of moist gravel for humidity; <i>sap causes mouth burning and skin irritation</i>
African Violet	<b>M</b> ; bright light needed for bloom; set plant on a tray of moist gravel for humidity; avoid getting water on leaves; fertilize regularly
Agalonema	<b>E</b> ; tolerates low light; keep soil slightly moist; avoid cold air/drafts
Arrowhead	<b>E</b> ; moderate light; plant prefers to be somewhat dry; <i>sap irritates skin and causes mouth pain</i>
Begonia	Care varies by species; bright light needed; fertilize blooming types regularly
Boston Fern	<b>E</b> ; bright light, no direct sun; keep moist; often need repotting after purchase. Use sharp scissors to clip off fronds that break or turn brown
Brake Fern (Pteris species)	<b>E</b> ; excellent fern for beginners; moderate light; keep soil slightly moist, avoid over-watering; foliage is easily damaged by physical contact
Bromeliad	<b>M</b> ; bright light needed for bloom; add water to the 'cup' part and moisten soil when it becomes dry, replace water in the cup every 10 days. Fertilize regularly during summer
Devil's Ivy/Pothos	<b>E</b> ; tolerates low light; fast grower; prefers to be somewhat dry; <i>sap causes burning sensations in mouth</i>
Dieffenbachia	<b>M</b> ; moderate to low light; keep soil slightly moist; <i>sap is extremely toxic, may cause swelling on tongue and throat</i>
Dracaena/Com Plant	<b>E</b> ; tolerates moderate to low light; prefers to be on the dry side; lop off top if plant becomes too tall, branches will sprout just below.
Parlor Palm	<b>M</b> ; adapts well to low light; keep soil slightly moist; spray foliage with water regularly and inspect often for spider mites and other pests.
Peace Lily	<b>M</b> ; tolerates low light; needs bright light to bloom; keep soil slightly moist but avoid over-watering; feed monthly spring through fall.
Peperomia	<b>E</b> ; low to moderate light; allow soil to dry between watering, plants are sensitive to over watering.
Philodendron	<b>E</b> ; moderate light; allow plant to dry out between watering; rinse leaves at least twice per year; <i>sap ingestion causes burning of the mouth, vomiting.</i>
Schefflera	<b>M</b> ; bright light; feed monthly; allow plant to dry out somewhat between watering; plants do not like to be moved.
Snake Plant	<b>E</b> ; tolerates low light; keep soil dry between watering; easily propagated from cuttings.
Spider Plant	<b>E</b> ; bright to moderate light. To propagate, set pots near mother plant and sink young plantlets into the soil. Once rooted (2-3 weeks) cut from parent plant.
Weeping Fig	<b>D</b> ; bright, indirect light; allow to become somewhat dry between watering; plant does not like to be moved; inspect regularly for pests.
ZZ plant	<b>E</b> ; low to moderate light; allow soil to dry between watering; no known pests or diseases

