



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Keep Your Houseplants Happy (January 22, 2022)

by Kate Mackey, UCCE Master Gardener

In the Master Gardener's Virtual Conference of 2020, one of the presentations was on caring for houseplants. It was presented by Ernesto Sandoval, the manager and curator at the UC Davis Botanical Conservatory. He presented a wealth of information and tips on keeping our indoor beings of Chlorophyllian persuasion happy. I would like to pass on some of this wisdom and inspiration to the public.

What is a houseplant?

Well, you might say it is any plant that grows indoors, and you would be right. Kind of. Many plants will grow indoors when you first bring them home from the store or a nursery or a friend's house, however not all plants do well inside. Here are some of the issues you should be aware of. First, and I found this to be very interesting; most successful houseplants come from the tropical and subtropical regions of the world where they blissfully grow under the forest canopy or on the forest floor. They like low light and low humidity. Their temperature preferences are right around what humans like. Plants from the temperate zones where we live need more light, more range of temperature and humidity, and they like air circulation. Also, consider size. Yes, you may be able to grow that Norfolk Pine indoors, but that baby is going to get too large. Consider how big the plant is going to be especially if you have to move it around

What does a houseplant need?

What is the major environmental factor missing indoors?? Brace yourself. It is air movement. Plants need exercise. That was a head slapper for me. Yes, in the original Greenhouses invented in France, there were workers who went through the facility and shook the plants every day. Air circulation creates movement which is critical to making the plant stronger. It is part of the triad which includes light and temperature that plants need to survive.

So, let's talk about that triad... **LIGHT**. Most homes do not have good light for plants. Plants need light to make sugars they need to grow and reproduce. Many need bright indirect light which means a window that receives light but is not directly in the sun. If it is in the sun, filter the light with sheers. I have a room that is always bright. It faces north and the house right next to me is white so all day the light is bright but indirect. If your plants are getting "leggy" meaning they are growing long stems to stretch out to somewhere, they are probably trying to get to the light.



Next, of course is water. What kind and how much. First of all, a lot of city waters and local wells are chock full of minerals in the form of salts. Salts get in the way of plants taking up the nutrients they need. It has to do with particle charges and negative and positive ions. And you will be happy to know that I am not going to give a lecture on chemistry here but suffice to say, water that is heavy in minerals is bad for plants. So, the water you use should be bottled where the minerals have been taken out, or water purified by reverse osmosis. By the way, Brita filters do not take out minerals, they only take out organic matter.

Next up with water... **TOO MUCH**. The number one mistake that we humans make with our green companions is overwatering. We just love them a little too much. So how do we love them just the right amount? Sandoval has some interesting tips. First, the color of the soil is lighter if it is dry and darker when it

is wet. Also, as the plant gets dryer, the whole pot gets lighter. So, color and weight can be an indicator. The best indicator other than a moisture indicating tool is your finger. Just push it down an inch or so and see if it is moist. Easy and less costly. Sandoval recommends that you let the plant wilt just a little before you water it. Many houseplants, like a *Pothos*, will be good indicators of when everyone else is getting thirsty. Of course, different types of plants will need different care. Read the labels or hit the internet for tips on your particular plant.

Next issue is humidity. Most plants are growing in a humid environment. That may be unpleasantly moist for us humans so one tip that Sandoval had is to put your plants together so that they share the moisture that they are giving off. Also, possibly keeping some high humidity plants in the bathroom, where due to showering, the room is naturally more humid. Unfortunately, many bathrooms are too dark.

What kind of plants do well inside?

I had to laugh when Sandoval said “just because they sell it in the store, does not mean it will do well in the house.” A while ago, I was in one of the big hardware stores looking at some trees. I glanced at the tag and the tree was labeled Zone 5! Zone 5? I was in Zone 9! Poor tree. So, check the label of the plant.

The choice of plants for your home is of course a personal one based on what you like to look at, how much work you want to put into the care, and where you are going to put the plant. Sandoval recommended plants in the Aroid family. These common house plants are probably familiar to you:

- *Aglaonemas*, such as the Chinese Evergreen with its variegated leaf colors,
- *Monstera*s, such as the Swiss Cheese plant with the deep serrations in the leaves.
- *Philodendrons*, which come in a variety of shapes and sizes and colors.
- *Pothos*, of course, with the vines that grow and grow
- *Zamioculcas zamiifolia* or ZZ plant.



These plants and succulents like the jade plant (*Crassula* sp.) make excellent companions in our homes. They just need a bit of light (more is better but not direct sun), good water (watch those minerals please), and temperatures that are what you would like as well in your home. Not too hot and not too cold. And you will have happy houseplants. For more information, here is a link to Ernesto Sandoval's presentations:

<http://greenhouse.ucdavis.edu/conservatory/Resources.html>.



The Tulare-Kings County Master Gardeners will be available to answer your questions:

Visalia Farmer's Market- 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8-11 am, 2100 W. Caldwell Ave (behind Sears Building)

Hurley Garden Fruit Trees Pruning Demo - Sat., Jan 22, 1-3 pm, Hurley Elementary School, Visalia

Bring your questions about roses to our Public Rose Pruning Demonstrations:

January 17, 2022, 10:00 to 1:00 pm, Old Grangeville Church, Hanford

January 22, 2022, 10:00 to Noon, Ralph Moore Rose Garden, Hall and Main Street, Visalia

January 22, 2022, 9:00 to Noon, Woodlake Botanical Garden

Call us: Master Gardeners in Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30

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