



Keeping Your Houseplants Alive in the Winter

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Houseplants allow us to have greenery in our home during the long dark days of winter. Besides looking good, houseplants have beneficial effects for you and your home. Studies have shown that houseplants can clean and increase the amount of oxygen in the air; some even show a correlation between having greenery in the home and office and an elevation in mood, health, healing, and productivity.

Like all plants, houseplants require water, light, nutrients and good soil in order to thrive. Unlike outdoor plants, houseplants live in some sort of container, and thus require special care to help them thrive. Wintertime brings special challenges to the health of your plants. Overheated homes, sudden temperature changes, door and window drafts, and reduced daylight all present less than ideal conditions for plant health.

Here are four ways to ensure that your houseplants survive the winter months:

- **Monitor your watering routine.** Too much or too little water is the primary cause of houseplant failure. While it is true that plants require less water in the winter, keep in mind that your plants are living in an artificial environment that closely mimics summertime conditions. It may be cold and wet outside, but home heating systems tend to dehumidify the air within your home. Before watering, push your finger into the soil to see if there is moisture below the surface. If you see mold on the soil, then your plant is too wet. Plants receiving too much water can drop foliage or suffer from rotten roots, pests and mold. If the soil is powdery or has a hard surface, your plant needs water. Remember that most houseplant soil mixtures are a combination of peat and sphagnum moss, and vermiculite or perlite. Allow that mixture to dry out and it will not easily absorb water. If you note the water just running through the pot, immerse the pot and plant in a bucket or sink full of warm water for a few minutes to allow the soil to rehydrate. Misting weekly is another method to help your plants deal with lower winter humidity.

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- Maintain the quality of the soil. Most indoor potting mixtures contain almost nothing we would regard as soil in the conventional sense. These mixtures absorb water very well and resist compaction, but they tend to dry out quickly and do not contain any nutrients. While most houseplants will not normally require fertilizer in the winter months, some may, especially if they have not been fertilized previously. If this is the case, you may have to add fertilizer to their soil to ensure that they have sufficient nutrients to survive the winter months. Indoor plants will usually thrive on a fertilizer mixture with a 10-10-10 formulation. You can also supplement with a liquid fertilizer such as a seaweed or fish emulsion. However, the important thing to remember is not to overdo it.
- Prevent your plants from becoming root bound. Choosing the right size container is important when first potting your plant. Unlike outdoor plants, houseplants do not have a large soil area to expand their root systems, nor do they have the benefit of earthworms to break up and oxygenate the soil, so many houseplants, besides outgrowing their container, will develop a compacted and unhealthy root zone. Normally a houseplant should have its soil changed once a year. Whether you change the container depends on the type of plant, but if your plant is requiring watering more than once or twice a week most likely it is root bound and in need of a larger container.
- Provide adequate light. Although many plants differ in the amount of light they need, winter time can present challenges for ensuring that your plant gets enough sunlight. Not only is there less sunlight in winter but the sunlight enters at a lower angle. Studies have shown that light levels in winter can drop as much as fifty percent. To help the plants get adequate light, two rules must be followed. First, dust and wash the leaves of your plants regularly to ensure that they are able to absorb all of the available sunlight. Second, situate houseplants in an east-facing window if possible. West-facing windows are also a good choice. If you cannot do that then place them as close as possible to a window and, if necessary, add an artificial light source.

Houseplants are a beautiful addition to your home in winter. These four suggestions will help you keep them happy and healthy.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530)621-5512, or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See [http://mgeldorado.ucanr/Demonstration Garden](http://mgeldorado.ucanr/Demonstration_Garden) for more information and days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://uncanr.edu/master_gardenere-news. Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.