

How To Choose Cat-Safe Houseplants

Leimone Waite, Master Gardeners, Jan. 19, 2019

Q: I would like to give my friend a houseplant as a hostess gift, but she has cats so I don't want to give her one that is poisonous. Can you recommend a houseplant to give her?

A: Houseplants are a wonderful gift, not only do they help beautify the house but they help cleanse the air. NASA was the first to experiment with detoxifying the air with plants. While some plants filter benzene from the air, others filter formaldehyde and other household toxins. The University of Minnesota says that it takes approximately 15 (8- inch pot size) plants to clean the air in a 1,800-square-foot house.



The Spider plant is easy to grow and non-toxic to cats. (Photo: GNS)

Unfortunately most of the plants listed as the best at filtering the air are also toxic to cats. However, all houseplants will filter the air and brighten our mood while doing so. The Gold Fish plant, Spider Plant, all Peperomias and most of the small palms are easy to grow and non-toxic to cats. They take moderate light and fit into many decorating schemes. Other houseplants that are a bit harder to grow but are cat safe are the Prayer Plant, the Phalaenopsis Orchid, the Polka

Dot plant and many of the Begonias. These plants like bright, filtered light, may require special watering practices and warmer house temperatures at night.

With all houseplants avoid placing them in trouble spots, such as near heat or air conditioning ducts, on electronics or a radiator or between a curtain and a frosty window. Remember that air conditions can be very dry in the winter because of heated air. You can provide a little extra humidity with a pebble tray and some misting.

Houseplants should only be fertilized every other month with a good houseplant fertilizer and allowed to rest without fertilizer during the winter months. They should also not be overwatered, and at least once a month should be put under the shower spray to flush accumulated salts out of the pot and rinse dust off the leaves.

There are many studies to prove that plants make us feel happy. They brighten our environment, make oxygen from CO₂ and filter our air. During the short winter days when many folks are feeling depressed a plant will help to cheer them up. As you are thinking of the perfect Christmas gift, why not give a plant?

For more information on houseplants that are safe for pets, both cats and dogs, check out the ASPCA's website: <http://www.asPCA.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control/toxic-and-non-toxic-plants>

Q: A caller to the Master Gardeners office would like to know how to take care of Lion's Ear (*Leonotis leonurus*), after it has finished blooming. Should it be cut back? And if so, when should they cut it back?

A: *Leonotis leonurus* is a beautiful broadleaf evergreen large perennial with orange flowers native to South Africa. It also known as lion's tail and wild dagga and is a plant species in the Lamiaceae family.

It appreciates well-drained, loamy soil with plenty of compost. It is drought tolerant and can take full sun. Lion's Ear can typically survive temperatures down to 20 degrees Fahrenheit but may freeze back and come back from the roots in the spring when exposed to temperatures in the low 20s.

If you don't like the look of faded flowers, you can cut the flower stems back by about half in the fall. Otherwise, you can leave them until late winter or early spring and then cut back.

In a cold winter, the plant may freeze and the foliage will turn brown. Wait until late winter to cut the dead vegetation down, just above live growth. Cover the roots with a 1-inch thick layer of mulch. Mulch the roots, but don't cover the crown of the plant. Covering the crown could cause the plant to rot. The plant should resprout with new growth from "hardened wood" in the spring.

During a warmer winter, the plant may remain green all winter. However, in order to stimulate new growth for the next season, cut the plant by about half in the early spring.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.