

## House Plant Care and Propagation

By Rick Pudwell

The best house plants are those that come from parts of the world where the temperatures approximate those in our homes. Usually what we call foliage plants, which are understory plants from tropical forests in many parts of the world, are the easiest to care for in home conditions.

One big issue is low humidity. Central heat and air conditioning suit us well but they drastically lower humidity. We all know what our humidity is like in summer. This is what most indoor plants prefer. Daily misting and grouping several plants together will help. Also, a humidifier in the plant room can be useful.

Heat and air vents and doors that open frequently, especially in winter, should be avoided. A plant frequently exposed to a draft can let you know by dropping its leaves.

Containers for plants should always have a drainage hole. Most plants (there are some exceptions) should be allowed to dry between waterings. When the surface soil is dry to the touch, water well until the water drains into the saucer under its pot. Wait for an hour or so if the water hasn't been absorbed. Empty the saucer. Failure to do so can cause roots to rot.

Light depends on the species, but even foliage plants benefit from sunlight through a window except in summer when it is very intense. Most flowering plants need as much light as you can provide. Lacking a sunroom or greenhouse, plant lights can be a useful supplement to natural light. Plant lights can be on up to 16 hours a day. Remember plants need darkness, just like we do. At the equator days and nights are both 12 hours in duration. If you must display a plant in a dark corner of a room. Try to rotate it frequently with another one in better light conditions.

Container size: remember when repotting a plant, the container should only be 1 or 2 inches larger in diameter than the pot it was growing. If you pot a plant in too large a volume of soil it will dry out very slowly and can rot before its roots have filled the new container. Always use a good quality commercial potting soil. As with an outdoor planting, plant at the same depth the plant was growing. Never deeper.

Fertilizing is best done with a water-soluble plant food such as Peters or Miracle Grow. Most indoor plants should be fertilized very little if at all in the short days of winter, October through February. The rest of the year I like to use half the recommended dilution, but use it every other time I water.

Pests and diseases. The most common indoor pests are Mealy bugs, White flies and Aphids. Sometimes if you catch an infestation in time you can wash the pests away with a stream of water. If you need something stronger, systemic insecticides that can be applied to the soil are

probably best in indoor conditions. The same chemicals used in your garden will work for indoor plants, but it is best to wait for a mild day when the outdoor temperature is above 50 degrees to move the plant outdoors to spray it and then move it back inside before nightfall. In the case of a disease such as a virus it is best to discard the affected plant.

Propagation can be done by seed, cuttings or division. Separate articles address these three methods.