Indoor Plant Care

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Winter months in the south can lend itself to a sparse, rather drab landscape. Many gardeners will continue their love for plants during these landscaping down times by bringing plants indoors or simply having a house full of plants. Indoor plants are widely used in both homes and commercial buildings such as malls, restaurants and shopping centers to help bring the outdoors inside. Growing plants indoor can be quite a challenge as most indoor environments are not conducive to healthy plant growth for several reasons. Light conditions can be rather dim for most plants, modern air conditioning systems are designed to eliminate humidity from the air causing plant moisture problems and indoor environments are ideal for many pests to thrive. Among other problems, these are probably the cause of many indoor plant failures.

The environment we produce in our dwellings and commercial buildings often are a detriment to healthy plant activity and indoor plant light requirements are often the cause of many problems. Light provides the energy for plants to produce food. The amount of light needed by plants is often measured in foot-candles (ft-c). The interior of a well-lighted home is often less than 100 ft-c in light intensity while outdoors on a sunny day, light intensities can reach 10,000 ft-c. There is a large difference between indoor and outdoor light quantities and differences can be seen from room to room as well. Due to this, houseplants are often classified on their light requirements. Plants which will grow in low light levels need 75 to 200 ft-c. Plants needing a medium level of light need 200 to 500 ft-c. Those plants needing a high level of light need 500 to 1000 ft-c and those classified ahs very high light level plants need 1000+ ft-c. Be aware also that window treatments, overhangs, outdoor tree shading and time of year can influence the amount of light coming in through a window at any given time.

Most homes simply do not allow enough light in to allow sufficient growth of many very high or high light plants. The exceptions would be those homes with bright sunrooms and greenhouses. Plants needing very high light conditions would include: hibiscus, begonias and geraniums. Plants needing a high light environment may be successfully grown near bright windows with a southern or western exposure. Plants in this group would include: aloe, coleus, Christmas cactus and zebra plant.

Many of our homes fall into the medium to low light level environments. This would be shown by a ft-c level between 100 to 150 ft-c as seen on a light meter. Medium light plants include: asparagus fern, schefflera, palm, spider plant, ivy, dracaena, corn plant, weeping fig, Boston fern, peace lily, African violet, philodendron and wandering jew. Those plants that will thrive in low light levels include: cast-iron plant, snake plant, pothos and Chinese evergreen.

If your home is rather dark, artificial lighting is available to supplement what comes in through your windows allowing you to be successful in houseplant culture. Many indoor plants will thrive under artificial lighting provided by fluorescent lamps and special incandescent lights. A large variety of lamps are available for indoor plant growth. Ordinary incandescent light generally do not work well for indoor plants as the plants tend to become ‘leggy’ if that is the only light source available.

Another major factor to consider when growing houseplants is watering. Improper watering is probably the main cause of houseplant death. Plants need water to survive but overwatering can lead to a loss of oxygen in the soil causing root and plant death. Diagnosing a plant problem due to poor watering practices is difficult as both under-watering and over-watering lead to the same symptoms.

The common question to watering is ‘How much and how often do I water my houseplants?’ The answer to this question will depend on several factors including: plant type, its growth stage, its location and growing environment, pot type and size and soil mix characteristic. Plants with large or thin leaves and fine surface roots will need more water than succulent plants with thick, fleshy leaves. When plants are not actively growing or dormant, they will need less water than those plants going through a flush of

growth. Water will also move through porous clay pots more than nonporous, glazed or plastic pots. A large plant in a small container will also need more water than a small plant in a large container. Those potting mixtures that contain a high percentage of peat moss will hold more water than those mixes high in bark and sand content. Finally, plants located in a warm, sunny area will need more water than a plant in a cool, low-light environment.

When you do water your indoor plants, add enough water to allow the water to drain freely from the bottom of the pot. This will assure that you are filling the entire root system with moisture and will help flush out any accumulated salt buildup. Several methods can be used to determine when a plant needs watering:

- Feel the soil – insert your finger into the soil mix to a depth of about 2 inches. If the soil feels dry at your finger tip, the plant needs watering.
- Estimating pot weight – as the soil dries, it becomes lighter. Over time you will be able to determine by weigh if a plant needs watering.
- Tap the pot – tapping the sides of a pot ca tell you if a plant needs watering. A soil with adequate moisture will give a dull sound when the pot is tapped and a dry soil will give a hollow sound.
- Soil color – most potting mixtures will change from a dark color to a lighter color as it dries.