Winter Houseplant Care

This winter enjoy not only the oxygen that houseplants provide you, but also the beauty they bring to any indoor living space. Some winter challenges your houseplants could experience that you will want to consider include the following: a reduction in sunlight intensity, decrease in plant growth, and low indoor humidity levels.

Maintenance

Here are some helpful hints for keeping your indoor plants happy this cool season. First you want to arrange your plants in your home according to their light needs. South-facing windows receive the most direct sunlight in the winter, while north-facing windows receive the least.

Due to a decrease in sunlight levels during the winter, many plants do not grow as fast as they might during the spring and summer months. This reduction in plant growth means that you only need to water sparingly and no fertilizer is required during this time period. If you are unsure of when to water, always test the soil with your finger and water when the soil feels dry at a depth of 1 to 2 inches.

Heating our homes during cold weather makes maintaining enough moisture in the air one of the greatest challenges for growing plants successfully indoors. To boost indoor humidity, you can do one of the following: place plant pots on a pebble-filled tray filled with water, use a room humidifier, or mist your plants daily using a water bottle.

Many residents in this county move their houseplants outside during the warmer months. Unfortunately when you bring your plants back inside for the winter there is the possibility that you also brought some plant pests indoors too. To help ward off potential invaders it is very important that you always care for your plants properly to ensure that they are healthy. Plants that are under stress due to unfavorable growing conditions are particularly susceptible to insect and mite injuries. Make sure your houseplants are getting enough light, water, and humidity. Check your houseplants regularly for any unwanted pests, because the sooner you detect a problem the easier it will be to treat for it.
**Houseplant Pests**

**Aphids**

Aphids, which are sometimes referred to as plant lice, are small insects that suck sugar from plants. They are about 1/8 inch long and come in a range of colors. The typical species found on houseplants are yellow-green or red in color. You will most often find them on the new plant growth or on the underside of leaves. You may also notice a sticky substance called honeydew near aphid feeding areas. Honeydew is a byproduct of the plant sap that aphids feed on. This honeydew often attracts ants and fungi, the most common being black sooty mold. If you have a small infestation you can destroy aphids with jets of water, or take a cotton swab dipped in 70% rubbing alcohol and apply it to individual aphids. If you have a large population of aphids it would be more efficient to treat the entire plant with an insecticide according to label instructions. If you do use an insecticide make sure it is approved for indoor use.

**Spidermites**

Spidermites are very hard to see without some type of magnification, therefore these pests often go unnoticed until after they have done their damage. Some signs to look for include silk webbing covering plant leaves and stems, premature leaf drop, or tiny yellow puncture wounds on the underside of leaves. If you have a large infestation first try pruning out heavily infested branches. It is always important to isolate infested plants away from your other houseplants to prevent the spread of pests. Insecticidal soaps may provide some control, however the use of a miticide may be necessary if the infestation is severe.

**Mealybugs**

These pests are often seen wrapped in a wooly white substance. Mealybugs have a gray body and the females are wingless. Like the aphid, mealybugs feed on plant sap. When they feed they tend to exude sugary honeydew, which is the wooly white substance you will often see around their bodies. You can find them hiding and feeding under leaves or in the joints where two stems connect. Each female can produce up to 600 eggs at a time so it is important to control these pests early. Treat with insecticidal soap or remove individual mealybugs and waxy egg sacs using a cotton swab moistened with 70% rubbing alcohol.

---

**Tips for Late Winter Pruning**

- Plants that typically flower during the summer can be pruned in the winter. Examples include fruit trees, crape myrtles, and glossy abelia.
- Always prune dead, diseased, or broken branches first.
- Next prune suckers and watersprouts.
- Look for branches that cross over and rub against each other and prune one of the two.
- It is recommended that you only prune 1/3 of the plant. This is the maximum amount you should remove each time you prune.
- When cutting branches over 1 1/2 inches in diameter, use a 3-part cut.
- Sterilize pruning tools between plants to prevent the spread of plant diseases.

**Pruning Myths Exposed**

- Tree topping is not an accepted pruning practice.
- Do not cut off branches flush with the trunk. This practice can delay healing. Be sure to cut right above the branch collar.
- It is not recommended that you paint pruning wounds. This actually prevents the tree from naturally healing.
- Filling large cavities with concrete is a practice that should always be avoided.

We are pleased to be able to provide you this educational information.

Karen Blaedow
Extension Agent
Agriculture and Natural Resources
Horticulture