Yard and Garden —10-29-2016 —Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

For the past few weeks, cover and uncover has been our modus operandi (M.0.) If frost is forecasted for the evening, out we go into our yard with blankets in hand, destined to cover those plants we wish to protect. The following day as temperatures warm up, off come the blankets. Continuing with such a ritual seems futile. Everyone knows freezing temperatures will soon prevail, and for those plants deemed not hardy, blankets will no longer help. They will finally succumb to the killing frost.

I cling to the hope of an "Indian Summer" to give me a little more time. "Indian Summer" can best be defined as sunny, above freezing, clear weather that returns following a freeze. Such reprieve usually lasts until mid-November. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that an "Indian Summer" will occur.

Whether an "Indian Summer" arrives or not, I do look forward to the end of another gardening season; however, there is always a part of me that desires to continue gardening. The answer to this conundrum is to take my gardening indoors.

An indoor garden consists of having a few potted plants to enjoy through the winter months. Whether growing flowers or other potted plants, the most important factor for their success is light— and lots of it.

Often we don't think much about the amount of light outside as it changes from season to season, but presently it is a major factor and especially for plants grown indoors. We are currently experiencing shorter amounts of daylight, and the amount will continue to shrink as winter approaches. Placing plants indoors in an unobstructed south or west window will work, but they will benefit greatly with a boost from an artificial light source such as fluorescent grow-lights.

Growing plants under lights controlled by an automatic timer allows one to control the intensity of light. The wattage of the bulb, the length of exposure time and how close the bulb is to the plant's foliage determines the intensity. Natural sunlight is ideal light, but for those plants grown indoors. fluorescent grow-lights are better. Full-spectrum fluorescent grow-lights replicate approximately 94 percent of the solar spectrum. Recent innovations in

fluorescent bulb technology have resulted in new-style bulbs, lower in profile and higher in efficiency. Fluorescents are ideal because they give off very little heat. Contrarily, regular incandescent bulbs are not recommended because they give off too much heat and can burn tender foliage.

Being able to position and adjust the lights within two to three inches of the foliage is ideal. Exposure of ten to fourteen hours of artificial light is also important. If one's plants are getting leggy and thin, it means that they are not getting enough light intensity. Brighter bulbs, longer exposure time, and moving the light source closer to the foliage will help remedy this problem. Likewise, a rest period is equally important. House plants should experience at least eight hours of darkness to remain healthy.

Obviously, non-freezing temperatures, good potting soil, fertility and water also influence the performance of houseplants, but proper lighting is the number one priority that determines whether house plants will perform well or poorly.

Once the proper light source has been secured, it's time to determine what plants you want to carry indoors. With frost now near, time is of the essence. Select your plants and carry them indoors before it's too late. Once that is accomplished —ah — no more covering and uncovering!