

Horticulture Column Submission
Phoebe Eichhorst, Horticulture Aide
Buffalo County Extension

Title: Humidity: Creating Happier and Healthier Plants This Winter

Over the weekend, I stopped in to grab a latte from one of the local coffee shops. While waiting, I noticed a palm plant in the front window. Next to it, a humidifier was running and blowing a fine mist over the palm's lower half. "Now that is a topic I could cover!" I thought. Winter is notorious for chapped lips, cracked skin, and way too much static. There isn't enough moisture in the air for us to be comfortable, so you can guess that there definitely isn't enough for our house plants to thrive. Let's talk about humidity during the winter and some solutions that will make your plants, and you, healthier and happier this winter.

Many of our favorite house plants come from tropical forests that are used to a much higher level of moisture in the air. It wasn't named a rainforest for nothing! Just like that palm plant, without a little help, plants, too, can suffer during the winter. We crank the heat up and that dries plants out, especially if they're placed near registers or fireplaces. No one, especially the plant, wants crispy leaves. If you're curious as to how your plants are faring this winter, check for brown leaf tips and wilting as they can indicate a lack of moisture. If you find these things (and even if you don't!), you can be sure there are a couple of options to get your plants back in happier shape.

Misting is probably the most common solution. It helps to increase the humidity around your plant, but doesn't last very long. Some plants, like African violets, should not be misted because they have little hairs that are susceptible to disease if misted. For most plants that need a moisture pick-me-up, a humidifier is a better option as it adds a steady stream of mist to the air throughout the day. And the best part? You, too, benefit from the added moisture from a humidifier! No more static!

Another consideration is to group them. Everyone likes friends, even plants! Figure out who has similar humidity needs and put them close by one another. Plants lose water through the stomata on their leaves in a process called transpiration so by grouping the plants the relative humidity increases and a microclimate is born.

Sometimes, the best option is to place your house plants in a different room during the winter months. The bathroom is always a good choice as it is usually more humid than other rooms in the house. Make sure that there's a window, though, if you aren't just taking your plant on a field trip while you shower. If you'd like, you can even give your plants their own shower, which cleans the leaves and increases moisture. Additionally, if you let your clothes air dry, placing your plants in the same room will allow them to "soak" up the moisture.

The last idea is to use pebble trays, which has the potential to add to the design aesthetic of your home. Grab a tray and put about an inch of similar shaped pebbles in it. Fill the tray with water that reaches halfway up the pebbles, and then place your pot on the pebbles. Make sure it's secure and don't let the base of the pot touch the water as that can lead to waterlogged roots. The water in the pebble tray will then slowly evaporate and give the plant more moisture. Since this option involves standing water, it's important to rise out the tray and pebbles to discourage bacteria or insects. Whichever option you decide to employ, I hope that both you and your plants feel a little healthier and happier. If you have any questions or suggestions on topics, please feel free to reach out to me at the Buffalo County Extension Office by phone at 308.236.1235 or email at phoebe.eichhorst@unl.edu.