



Houseplant Care in the Winter

Houseplants have less than ideal growing conditions during the winter months. Short days and long nights, low relative humidity, and cold drafts can be stressful to many houseplants. Good consistent care, however, should keep them healthy and attractive.

To make up for the short days and long nights of winter, move houseplants closer to windows. Supplemental lighting is another option. Light units containing special grow lights can be purchased from mail order companies or at garden centers. Gardeners can also build their own lighting structure. A standard fluorescent unit containing one cool white 40 watt tube and one warm white 40 watt tube provides adequate light for houseplants. Plants should be placed within 6 to 12 inches of the lights.

Many houseplants prefer a relative humidity of 40 to 50 percent. Unfortunately, the humidity level in many homes during the winter months may be only 10 to 20 percent. Humidifiers are an excellent way to increase the relative humidity in the home. Grouping plants together is an easy way to raise humidity levels. The water evaporating from the potting soil, plus water lost through the plant foliage, will increase the relative humidity in the vicinity of the houseplants. Misting houseplants is not an effective way to raise the relative humidity. The plant foliage dries quickly after misting. Misting would have to be done several times a day to be effective and is simply not practical.

If you've succeeded with African violets try these related plants, both commonly known as lipstick or goldfish plant- *Columnnea banksii* (smooth waxy leaves) and *C. gloriosa* (hairy leaves). These vining plants, with tubular yellow, orange or red flowers, require bright light, but no direct sun, and average room temperatures. Provide high levels of humidity with frequent misting, a pebble tray, or by placing the plant in a bathroom or kitchen.

Houseplants generally require less frequent watering during the winter months. As always when watering houseplants, water thoroughly. Water should drain out the bottoms of the pots. If the water drains into a saucer, discard the excess.

The plant species, composition of the potting soil, and environmental conditions in the home, determine watering frequency. Ferns prefer an evenly moist soil and should be watered relatively frequently. Cacti and succulents, on the other hand, should not be watered until the potting soil is completely dry. Most houseplants should be watered when the soil surface becomes dry to the touch.

Fertilization is generally not necessary during the winter months as most houseplants are growing very little or resting. Resume fertilization in March or April as growing conditions improve and plants begin to grow more actively. Temperatures of 55 to 70 degrees F are adequate for most houseplants. During the winter months, keep houseplants away from cold drafts, radiators, and hot air vents.

Winter can be a difficult time for houseplants. However, problems can be minimized by providing them with good consistent care.

Natalia Bjorklund is an Extension Educator with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension office, serving Dodge County. She can be reached at the office here in Fremont at 1206 W. 23rd, by phone at 402.727.2775, or email at natalia.bjorklund@unl.edu and on Twitter - @GreatPlainsBees