

Houseplant Tips

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Houseplants have increased in popularity. The benefits of caring for plants and having green plants around us all year are well documented. Here are a few houseplant tips for this time of year and a note about poisonous houseplants to be aware of.

Late winter is a good time to repot root-bound houseplants. While many plants prefer to be slightly root bound, if repotting is not done as needed there may be more roots than soil mass and this affects moisture and nutrient availability.

Over time, potting mixes can become compacted in a container and reduce drainage. Soil salts from softened water and fertilizers can build up in soil over time and negatively affect growth. If you see a white residue on containers, this is a sign of salt buildup.

When re-potting, go up one container size. For example, if a plant is growing in a 4-inch diameter container, moving it into a six-inch diameter pot is best. Over-potting a plant results in too large of a volume of growing medium that takes too long to dry out, increasing the risk of root rot.

To reduce root rots in houseplants, a well-drained potting mix and the right size container with drainage holes are needed; along with not overwatering. This is why we recommend using a well-drained potting mix and not using soil from outdoor gardens in containers. These soils are too poorly drained for pots.

Do not place gravel in the bottom of containers. While this is commonly thought to improve drainage, it is a myth. Instead it creates a zone of saturation that is harmful to roots as soil oxygen is reduced in overly wet soils.

The reason this happens is because water does not readily drain between different textures. The texture of a potting mix is much different than the texture of gravel. What happens is the potting mix has to become saturated before excess water begins to drain into the gravel, creating a saturation zone above the gravel.

Houseplants need fertilization. The small amount of medium they grow in requires nutrient replacement. Fertilization provides the macronutrients of nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. Repotting into a fresh mix helps provide equally important micronutrients.

Due to small soil mass, along with low light levels and warm indoor temperatures, avoid overfertilizing houseplants, especially with nitrogen. As a rule, fertilization is not recommended during winter when houseplants are in a semi-dormant state. The active growth period of April through October is the time to fertilize about every two weeks to once a month.

Light is one of the most limiting factors in growing indoor plants. While some plants are better adapted to lower light levels and best to use as houseplants, supplemental lighting with grow lights may be needed. Know that a south window in winter will not provide adequate light for plants requiring high light levels.

As more plants are grown indoors, it's wise to be aware of poisonous plants to keep them out of reach of children and pets. A few houseplants containing toxins include Philodendron, Dieffenbachia, Chinese evergreen; and Aloe Vera sap if ingested, as well as others. Depending on the toxin present, and amount ingested or level of contact, effects may range from stomach upset to dermatitis to death.