

Winter Care for Houseplants

There is hardly a household that does not have a houseplant of some type. It may be the easy to grow philodendron to one of the more persnickety camellias. No matter what level of plants chosen to grow, they require somewhat different care during winter to keep them in good condition.

During the short days of winter, houseplant growth slows. This is a direct result of the lower light levels in winter. As the plant's growth slows with the natural changes, how we care for them must also be adjusted.



Watering is one of those changes. The amount of water the plants require will decrease, increasing the length of time between watering. Excess water fills air spaces in the soil resulting in roots that receive less oxygen than they need for good growth. It is best to water by touch, not a set schedule. If the soil feels dry an inch deep, it is time to water. Each time water is applied add enough so that some of the excess flows out of the bottom of the pot. This will wash out excess salts that tend to accumulate within potting soil.

Changes should also occur in how often and how much fertilizer should be applied. Normally it is best to apply half the amount of fertilizer for flowering plants and one forth the amount for foliage houseplants. Excess fertilizer results in plants that become leggy and weak. Basically, stimulating growth at a time when low light levels cannot support it causes plant stress.

Location is another factor that should be considered during winter. Since the day length is short, being moved to areas of the room, which may receive more light is beneficial. South, west or east-facing windows are best. Keep the plants out of drafts from doors or direct output from heating ducts. Cold drafts chill the plants resulting in yellowing and leaf drop. Dry heat decreases humidity, which results in browning leaf tips and margins. Some houseplant experts recommend placing high humidity plants on a tray of shallow pebbles filled with water to increase humidity around the plant. This probably will not provide enough benefit to make a difference. Misting does not provide any long term benefit. If misting or a tray makes you feel good go ahead, but it may help you more than the plants.

Houseplants should provide pleasure during the long cold, dreary winter. Following these few tips can help increase the success resulting in better looking plants to brighten a winter day.

(by Dennis Patton, Horticulture Agent, Johnson County Kansas State Research & Extension)