



# House Plants

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## THE HOUSEPLANT ENVIRONMENT

**Light:** Light is often a limiting factor in growing house plants. The amount of light in a house varies from room to room, depending on the number of windows in each room and the direction in which they face. **North-facing** windows tend to provide the least amount of light. Plants that are tolerant of low light conditions may be able to grow in north-facing windows, but they should be placed close to the window. **East-facing** windows provide indirect light through most of the day and cooler temperatures. Flowering house plants, which need cooler temperatures often do well in east facing windows. **South-facing** windows provide the greatest amount of light, especially in winter, when the sun is lower in the southern sky. Plants that need direct light or high levels of light do well in southern exposures. This high light comes with higher temperatures. If a plant cannot tolerate high temperatures, sheer curtains or mini-blinds can also be used to regulate the amount of light received. **West-facing** windows provide indirect light in the morning and early afternoon, but strong direct light and higher temperatures in mid- to late afternoon. Plants that need either direct light or bright, indirect light would do well in front of or near a west-facing window.

Many plants do well under fluorescent lights, but the lights must be close (within a few inches of the plant) to produce good growth. Fluorescent lighting is best. Regular fluorescent tubes are fine for plant growth, there is no need to buy expensive "grow lights". Incandescent lights do not produce the right spectrum of light for plant growth and they produce more heat than light. Do not use them near plants.

There are signs to look for which indicate that a plant is receiving too much light or too little. Plants that are receiving too little light may have stretched or leggy growth, abnormally small leaves, or a yellowish-green color. Flowering plants may not flower when light levels are too low. Plants with variegated leaves may revert back to all green leaves under low light conditions. Plants that are receiving too much light may have leaves that appear bleached or scorched. The leaves may also take on a pale, yellow green color.

**Humidity:** Most house plants prefer humidity levels between 40 and 60%. Heating the home in winter can lead to lower levels of humidity. A room humidifier would provide increased humidity for the entire room, making it more comfortable for plants and people alike. Misting by hand is not recommended as the amount of humidity produced is very small and short-lived.

**Temperature:** Most house plants are tropical or subtropical in nature and thus must have temperatures above 55°F. Temperatures below 55°F may cause house plant leaves to droop. As a rule of thumb, foliage plants prefer temperatures between 65 and 75°F. Flowering house plants prefer 65-75°F during the day and 55-60°F at night. Very high temperatures can be detrimental.

## BASIC HOUSE PLANT CARE

**Watering:** There is no magic formula or timetable for watering house plants. Since temperatures, light and humidity tend to change, it is not practical to water house plants on a set schedule. The best way to tell if a plant needs water is to feel the soil and see how dry it is. When the top 1 inch of soil is dry, it is time to water.

Top watering and bottom watering are both acceptable methods. With bottom watering, salts may accumulate in the soil and need to be flushed out from the top periodically. When watering from the top, apply water until it comes out the drainage hole. Let the plant sit in the water in the saucer about 15 minutes, then drain off the excess water. When watering from the top, be sure to apply the water evenly to the soil surface. If all the water is applied in one spot, a "pipeline" might develop and water will flow through without wetting the soil. This method works for most plants. A few plants have different needs (noted in the chart below).

**Fertilizing:** There are several types of fertilizer specially formulated for house plants. They may be liquids, powders intended to be dissolved in water or slow release products (beads or sticks) to be placed in the soil. Most house plants do not need much fertilizer. The best time to fertilize is when the plant is actively growing. During the winter, house plants are not growing much and should not be fertilized. As the days grow longer, growth resumes and fertilizer may be applied. Usually fertilizing every 4-6 weeks is adequate. Be sure to follow the directions on the fertilizer package. Two cautions on fertilizing: 1. fertilizer will not compensate for poor growing conditions and 2. fertilizer should not be applied to a wilted or dry plant; it needs water, not fertilizer.

### Traditional houseplants

<i>(Scientific name)</i> Common name	Light	Watering ("standard" indicates the process outlined above)	Humidity	comments
<i>(Aglaonema sp.)</i> Chinese Evergreen	Medium to low	Keep it a bit more dry than 'standard'	Average	There are a number of varieties available, some with light colored leaves, others with dark leaves
<i>(Chlorophytum comosum)</i> Spider plant	Bright, indirect light with some direct sun	Keep thoroughly moist	Average	
<i>(Codiaeum variegatum)</i> Croton	High	standard	Moderate to high	Crotons are prized for their brightly colored foliage. They are prone to spider mites when grown in low humidity
<i>(Dieffenbachia sp)</i> Dumbcane	Prefers high but will tolerate lower levels	Keep it a bit more dry than 'standard'	Average	
<i>(Epipremnum aureum)</i> Pothos	Color best in bright light, but it will tolerate low light.	standard	Average	
<i>(Hedera helix)</i> English Ivy	High	Keep it a bit more dry than 'standard'	Moderate to high	There are many varieties available. Some have variegated foliage; some have curly or cut foliage. Spider mites are a common problem.
<i>(Peperomia sp.)</i> Peperomia and other names by species	Medium to bright	standard	Average to high	There are many species of peperomia

<b>(Scientific name) Common name</b>	<b>Light</b>	<b>Watering ("standard" indicates the process outlined above)</b>	<b>Humidity</b>	<b>comments</b>
<i>(Saintpaulia hybrids)</i> African violet	Bright, indirect light	standard	Average	There are numerous cultivars available
<i>(Spathiphyllum hybrids)</i> White peace lily	Medium	Watering is a little tricky. It wilts easily if under watered and leaves turn black if over watered.	Average to high	

### Houseplants: new choices

<b>(Scientific name) Common name</b>	<b>Light</b>	<b>Watering ("standard" indicates the process outlined above)</b>	<b>Humidity</b>	<b>comments</b>
<i>(Alocasia)</i> Elephant Ears	Bright, indirect	Keep it a bit more dry than 'standard'	High	
<i>(Anthurium)</i> Flamingo flower	Bright, indirect	standard	High	There are different species and cultivars available. Flowers may be red, coral, pink or white. Avoid drafts.
Bromeliads (several species)	Bright, indirect	Keep it a bit more dry than 'standard'; fill the cup with water	High	There are several species of bromeliad. Some have very colorful foliage and they produce long lasting flowers. The flower can last for months, but then the plant will die. The mother plant makes offsets.
Cactus (several species)	Bright, indirect to some direct sun	Keep on the dry side, but do water!! Use a potting mix made for cacti.	Average	There are many, many species of cactus and they don't always need the same thing
<i>(Pachira aquatica)</i> Money plant	Medium to bright, indirect	Water regularly but avoid standing water	High	
Succulents (several species)	Some direct sun, or at least, bright, indirect light	Keep on the dry side. Use a potting mix made for cacti.	Average	There are many, many species of succulents and they are often sold just under the name succulent. They don't always need the same thing
<i>(Zamioculcas zamiifolia)</i> ZZ plant	Bright, indirect. Can tolerate lower levels	Keep on the dry side	Average to high	