

The Care and Management of Tropical House Plants

By: Basil Bactawar, County Extension Director/Agent Union County Extension Service

Introduction

Indoor or house plants can be seen in many houses and office buildings because they increase the aesthetic value of the indoor environment. Furthermore, they put oxygen back into the air, and have a calming effect on people. They can be used to help kids develop responsibility by learning to care for them. However, managing them can be difficult because their growth and survival are influenced by several factors. An understanding of these factors can enable homeowners to become skillful in maintaining them.

Light: Plants need light to grow and survive because photosynthesis, the process of manufacturing food in plants requires light. These plants have different requirements for light. These requirements are low light, medium light, high light and sunny light. Most house plants come with labels that have information on light requirements. It is always a good practice to check the labels for the light requirements that match the light levels in the indoor locations where the plant will be placed. Additional lighting may be required if the location where a plant is placed does not provide adequate light.

Temperature: People feel comfortable between 72°F to 82°F. Indoor plants grow well between 58°F to 85°F because most of these plants originate from tropical and sub-tropical parts of the world. If the temperatures change rapidly, these plants may suddenly lose their leaves. Winter temperatures are relatively mild in Florida, and so transporting these plants from a garden center to a house without much insulation is possible. However, it is important to keep them from hot or cold draft.

Water: The ability to provide the correct amount of water to plants on a continual basis is the most important skill in caring for them. Plants die mainly from too much or too little water. Overwatering drives the air out of the soil. Plant roots need oxygen to respire, and if it is absent from the soil, the plant dies. Some plants can grow in a wet environment, but most of the tropical houseplant cannot. Furthermore, plants have different water requirements, so it is important to read the label that comes with the plant. Large plants, in general require more water than small plants. If the growing container is relatively small compared to the size of the plant, more frequent water may be required. For this reason, it is recommended to select the size of the pot that matches the requirements of the kind and size of the plant. Irregular watering schedule can lead to over or under watering because sometimes we forget to water our plants. It is advisable to water plants on a regular basis by following a schedule. Select a day in the week when you have enough time. For example, if Saturday is the day when you have some time, then water your plant every Saturday as required. The amount of water for each plant depends on the soil moisture. A practical way to determine if your house plant needs water is to push your index finger into the soil and feel the moisture level. If it is too wet, do not

add water. If it is dry, add water. If there is too much water in the saucer or decorative plant pot, it should be drained. In addition, it is a good practice to avoid water spills on the leaves and stems of the plants because it can lead to fungal growth.

Fertilizing: Fertilizers can be purchased from a garden center. Generally, fertilizer products for house plants contain all the macro and micro minerals the plants need. Follow the instructions on the label in order to avoid over or under fertilizing. Plants that have been recently purchased may not need fertilizing for the next 2 to 3 months. But it is always a good idea to keep an eye on your plant. Lighter green on the leaves may be signs that the plants need fertilizing.

Soil: The soils of indoor plants must be able to anchor the plants firmly into the soil. In addition, it must be able to allow air, nutrients and water to reach the roots, and allow excess water to drain from the pot. It is not advisable to use garden soil as potting soil because it contains fungal spores, bacteria, nematodes, and insects. Potting soils are available from garden centers as sterilized potting medium consisting peat moss, vermiculite, perlite etc. They can be purchased as separate ingredients and mixed to provide the consistence of potting medium required.

General maintenance: A healthy house plant does not add to the aesthetic value of the indoor environment if it has dust and dead leaves. Remove dead leaves as needed. If the tips of the leaves are dried up they can be trimmed with a clean pair of scissors. Dust can be removed with a feather duster or it can be wiped with a slightly wet paper towel. Avoid putting any oil on the leaves so that they may shine. In most plants, the upper side of the leaves have a waxy coat. This can give a shiny and healthy appearance of the leaves when carefully rubbed with a dry cleaning cloth. Care must be taken not to damage any leaves during the rubbing process. Some dead leaves fall on the soil and may promote fungal growth under the plants. These dead leaves should be removed regularly.

Pests: House plants can be attacked by a host of common insects such as aphids, mealy bugs, scale insects, trips, whiteflies and the two-spotted spider mites. These insects cause damage by sucking the sap of the plants. They can transmit viral diseases to them as well. Although the fungus gnat is a house plant pest, the adult does not damage the plant, but it is more of a nuisance. It is attracted to light and swarm around the windows. It can be controlled by foliar sprays. The larvae is found in the soil, and can be controlled by drenching the soil with an insecticide for larvae control.

We spend most of our time indoors next to house plants. When there is an insect problem, chemical control should be the last resort. It is advisable to consider the following as an integrated approach to control pests:

- (a) Check plants for insects before buying them. After purchase, place them in quarantine or in an area away for house plants for about 3 weeks.
- (b) Use sterilized potting soil.

- (c) Healthy plants can withstand pest problems better than weak and unhealthy plants. Fertilize them as required.
- (d) Periodically hose down plants with a jet of water to dislodge pests such as scale insects and mealy bugs. Cover the exposed surface of the soil with plastic saran wrap before doing so. Hosing the plant in your bath tub is an alternative instead of taking them outside.
- (e) Avoid taking house plants outside to prevent infestation by pests that are outdoors.
- (f) If you notice insects on your house plants, use 1 – 2 teaspoons full of mild dishwashing liquid soap per gallon of water (Do not use laundry or automatic dishwashing detergent).
- (g) Use a synthetic insecticide applied as a granular, stick or liquid to the soil.

Summary

- (1) Place house plants in an indoor location where the light requirements are met.
- (2) Pay attention to indoor temperatures needed for plant growth and survival.
- (3) Provide adequate water. Please note overwatering will kill house plants.
- (4) House plants need fertilizer too. Follow fertilization requirements.
- (5) It is not advisable to use garden soil as potting soil. Purchase sterilized soils from the gardening center.
- (6) Periodically remove dead leaves and dust from plants for a clean and attractive appearance.