



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHRIS RUSCH

Consider growing a low-maintenance houseplant, such as (from left) stapelia, spider plants or aloe vera plants that are more durable and simple to maintain.

# Making houseplants feel at home

**CHRIS RUSCH**  
Master Gardener

**Q**uestion: What has caused the leaves on my house plants to turn yellow and appear wilted?

**A**nsWER: There are many factors that affect the growth and vitality of houseplants. More houseplants are probably killed or injured by improper watering than by any other single factor. Yellowing, wilting and dropping of leaves are generally a sign of this. No general schedule can be used for watering all houseplants. The size

of the plant, the type of pot, light, temperature, humidity and other conditions influence the speed with which the soil mass dries out and the health of your plant is affected.

## WHEN TO WATER

In general, flowering plants need more water than foliage plants of the same size. Never water any plant unless it needs it. Soil kept either too wet or too dry causes plant roots to die, which leads to poor growth or death of the plant. Never allow plants to wilt, and never allow them to stand in water for long periods of time.

Learn to gauge the moisture content of the soil by its color and feel. Plants in clay pots need watering more frequently than those in plastic or glazed pots, since water evaporates through the porous wall of the unglazed clay. Keep this in mind when choosing pots for hanging plants or those that are difficult to water. A plastic pot can reduce the number of waterings that you must provide. As the soil surface dries, it becomes lighter. Under continued

drying, the soil begins to crack and pull away from the sides of the pot. When severe drying occurs, some damage already will have been done to the roots. Soil kept too moist becomes sticky and slimy, thus inviting root rots and other disease problems.

## KINDS OF WATER

Ordinary tap or well water is usually satisfactory for plants. Chlorine and fluoride is often added to city water and should not harm most houseplants. However, you can remove

chlorine by putting the tap water in an open container and just let it stand for 24 hours.

After this time, the chlorine will have diffused into the air. Another advantage to letting water stand is that it will be at room temperature when you are ready to use it. Cold water will shock plant roots, and repeated applications can stunt growth and invite disease. Rainwater and melted snow are excellent water sources. Water run through most water softeners, however, should not be used continuously for watering potted plants.

## HOW TO WATER

Plants may be watered from either the top or the bottom of the pot. If you prefer watering from the top, use a watering can with a small spout, and keep as much water off the foliage as possible. Each time, wet the entire soil mass, not just the top inch. Add water until it comes through the drainage hole in the bottom of the pot. Discard water that remains beneath the pot one hour after watering.

Watering from the bottom ensures thorough wetting of the soil mass. Place the pot in a

pan or saucer filled with water, or dunk the pot to just below its rim in a deep bucket of water. When the top of the soil becomes moist, the entire soil ball should be wet. Remove the pot, allow it to drain and return it to the saucer.

Salts may form a white accumulation on the soil surface if plants are watered regularly from the bottom. Occasional watering from the top helps wash out the salts. Don't allow the soil to reabsorb any water that has been run through the soil to leach out salts. If surface salt accumulation becomes too heavy to remove in this way, scrape off the surface soil and replace it with fresh soil. Try not to injure plant roots.

## DRAINAGE

Potted plants should always have good drainage. Occasionally, the drainage hole may become clogged by roots. Check it by pushing a finger, stick or pencil into it. Even if drainage from the pot is good, pot coverings can hold water. Pots wrapped in waterproof foil or placed in deep planters should be checked occasionally for standing water.

Plants with "wet feet" soon look sick—leaves yellow or drop, flowers collapse and normally healthy white roots turn brown. Any or all of these symptoms can result from stagnation of the water, too little soil oxygen and development of diseases that rot the roots.

## LIGHT

All flowering plants need moderately bright light. Plants kept continuously in poor light will have spindly shoots, few flowers, yellow foliage, poor flower color and, often, little or no growth. South, east or west windows are excellent for most flowering potted plants, with the possible exception of African violets and related plants,

which prefer a north window. Plants in bloom should be kept out of direct sunlight, or the flowers will heat excessively and collapse more quickly.

Foliage plants are generally divided into those suitable for low-light areas, moderate-light areas and bright-light areas. Only a few plants can tolerate dimly-lit room interiors. Most foliage plants do well with light at a north window, daylight with no direct sun or sunlight diffused through a lightweight curtain. Plants that require full sunlight should be put in a south window.

Plants can become acclimated to a location. An abrupt move from a low-light to a bright-light location may be damaging. Leaves gradually face toward light for maximum light absorption, especially in low-light areas. Moving a plant disrupts this orientation and causes the plant to use light less efficiently for a period of time. This is especially true of large plants. Many plants can be kept from getting one-sided by turning them once a week.

## HUMIDITY

Misting over the leaves of your house plants daily can help the plant overcome the stress of low humidity. Plants needing constant high humidity, such as orchids or gardenias, are best kept in kitchens or bathrooms, where humidity often runs higher. A relative humidity between 40 and 60 percent is best for most plants but is difficult to attain indoors.

## REPOTTING

A time for repotting is when the plant becomes pot-bound; this is, when the plant's roots are too extensive for its pot. A pot-bound plant may need to be watered too frequently and may grow poorly. A good potting mixture for most houseplants consists of a blend of three parts sphagnum peat,

one part vermiculite and one part perlite. Many commercially available peat-lite mixes are ideal for houseplants. Exceptions are epiphytic orchids, which should be potted in a very porous medium such as orchid bark, and cacti, which should be potted in equal parts of peat-lite mix and sterile sand. In most cases, avoid the addition of soil to a potting medium, as this often leads to poor drainage, overwatering and root diseases.

## WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS, HERE IS A LIST OF DURABLE HOUSEPLANTS:

Although all houseplants grow best with good care, a few tolerate abuse better than others. Some of the most durable houseplants are:

- Snake plant (*Sansevieria trifasciata*)
- Heart-leaf philodendron (*Philodendron scandens*)
- Golden pothos (*Epipremnum aureum*)
- Corn plant (*Dracaena fragrans*)
- Janet Craig dracaena (*Dracaena deremensis*)
- Baby rubber plant (*Peperomia obtusifolia*)
- Cast iron plant (*Aspidistra elatior*)
- Parlor palm (*Chamaedorea elegans*)
- Chinese evergreen (*Aglaonema modestum*)
- Spider plant (*Chlorophytum comosum*)
- Aloe vera (*Aloe vera*)

Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541-672-4461, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg.

*Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*

**ASK A  
MASTER  
GARDENER**

