

## LOOKING AFTER YOUR HOUSEPLANTS

**TEMPERATURE:** When central heating closes down at night rooms can become cold enough to cause damage to houseplants. Cold can also penetrate through windows in very cold weather so in both cases move the plants into the centre of the room to help prevent possible damage.

**CARE OF FOLIAGE:** The smooth glossy surfaces of the leaves of many houseplants respond well to being wiped on both sides with a leaf cleaner. This removes any dirt that may block up the breathing cells in the leaf surface and keeps it in healthy and active growth.

**FEEDING:** Houseplants need supplementary food as their roots can't leave the pot to find it. Nitrogen is the key to good foliage colour and growth. Phosphates slow the plant down at flowering time and Potash increases the size and amount of flowers produced and most proprietary houseplant fertilisers allow for this.

In spring, give a liquid feed when watering at least once a fortnight. Alternatively insert a houseplant fertiliser spike into the compost.

When repotting, mix a slow-release houseplant fertiliser into the potting compost.

## REPOTTING

Houseplants normally require repotting every other year. The pot size should be increased by 3-5cm each time, using the same type of compost as the plant is already growing in.

- First water the plant, which makes it easier to remove from the old pot. When removing carefully tease out any tangled roots, cutting the pot away at the base if necessary.
- Fill the bottom ¼th of the new pot with some drainage material such as broken pieces of flower pot, large stones or broken-up polystyrene packaging.
- Place a layer of potting compost on top of the drainage material so that when the plant is seated on it, the compost level is 3cm or so below the rim of the pot.
- Work compost in around the sides of the plant until the pot is full and water well. Then add more potting compost until it is topped back up to 3cm below the upper rim of the pot.
- Keep well watered.



## WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Watering can
  - Houseplant potting compost
  - Pots & saucers
  - Watering detectors
  - Houseplant fertiliser
  - Fertiliser sticks
  - Leaf wipes
  - Houseplants
- For more information:  
[www.rhs.org.uk/advice](http://www.rhs.org.uk/advice)  
[www.plantforlife.info](http://www.plantforlife.info)

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## THE EASY GUIDE TO

# GROWING HOUSEPLANTS



## HOUSEPLANTS

There's nothing better for brightening up an indoor environment than a well-grown houseplant and they are available in a vast range of forms from tiny gems suitable for the smallest windowsill to rampant growers for the largest hallway. They offer lush foliage, beautiful blooms and interesting forms. Some thrive in damp bathrooms, others need a sunny spot, so make sure you choose a houseplant that will tolerate the conditions in which it is to grow. Your garden centre or nursery will be able to offer advice on the best choice – or consider the suggestions on our list opposite.

Once you've made your purchase, take care when transporting houseplants to protect them from cold, drafts, wind or excessive heat. Failure to do so can lead to plant deterioration or even death, and the effects may not fully show themselves until some time after you've bought it.

## WATERING

Once your new houseplant is safely home, you need to care for it correctly to ensure that it remains in pristine condition – and this largely depends on how well it is watered. Too little or too much watering can cause problems.

**OVERWATERING:** Giving too much water can be as dangerous as underwatering. The roots not only require moisture but also air, so overwatering leads to the forcible removal of air from the potting compost so the houseplant's roots are killed by suffocation.

**BEST PRACTICE:** Watering little and often is the best advice, taking into account the growing environment and the seasons.

Watering from below is the best approach as some plants can suffer from rotting or sun scorch if water is directed onto their stems, root systems or foliage.

### DRAINAGE:

The best method is to stand the pot (which must have drainage holes in the bottom) on a suitable sized saucer into which a small amount of gravel has been placed. Fill the saucer to about ½ of its depth with water and leave the plant standing for 30 minutes. If all the water has been taken up you can repeat the operation until uptake stops, then any surplus water should be tipped away but of course retaining the gravel.



## SUNNY WINDOWSILLS

- *Saintpaulia* (African violets) will provide bursts of vividly coloured flowers all year round in a sunny spot.
- Cacti and succulents – there's a huge range available and some succulents, such as crassulas, look like trees. What's more they don't need much watering.
- *Schlumbergera truncata* (Christmas cactus) (pictured) has bright red, pink, white or orange flowers from Nov–March.
- *Aloe vera* has whitish green leaves with spines.



- *Solanum capsicastrum* (winter cherry) is an evergreen shrub with white summer flowers and orange or red autumn fruits. Keep moist but don't overwater.
- Avocado plants can be grown from a stone potted in moist compost with the pointed top just sticking out. When it splits, move to a sunny windowsill.

## LARGER SPECIMENS

- *Citrus sinensis* (orange) or *C. limon* (lemon) (pictured) do very well indoors over winter (put outside in sun in summer).
- *Monstera deliciosa* (Swiss cheese plant) can be very long-lived and large growing. Its attractive leaves, at least 40cm long, have deep cuts in the margins and large central holes.
- *Yucca elephantipes* has sparsely branched trunks and leathery, lance-shaped, mid-green leaves. It likes a sunny spot.
- *Ficus benjamina* (weeping fig) has variegated varieties that should be placed near a window, and plain green varieties that fare better in shadier areas.



- *Dracaena marginata* (dragon tree) has upright stems topped with grassy, red-margined leaves. Likes a brightly lit room.
- *Schefflera arboricola* (umbrella tree) has large green leaves like the spokes of an umbrella. Keep out of direct sunlight.
- *Howea forsteriana* (Kentia palm) has magnificent upright leaves.

## PESTS & DISEASES

**HEALTHY HABIT:** Plants that are well-fed and watered are less likely to suffer from pests and diseases, so prevention is always better than cure. However, keep a look-out for the following common houseplant pests. Pick off any visible pests from the stems, leaves or soil, clean leaves with water and use a chemical spray available from your garden centre or nursery, or try an organic or biological control.

- Aphids such as whitefly, greenfly and blackfly are one of the most common and troublesome of all garden insects, sucking sap from the plants, which causes the shoots and leaves to become distorted.

## SHADY BATHROOMS

- *Aspidistra elatior* (cast iron plant) (pictured) is quite tolerant of shady conditions. Its common name shows how robust it is.
- *Sansevieria trifasciata* (mother-in-law's tongue) is fairly shade tolerant, but its long fleshy sword-like leaves may need placing carefully in a bathroom!
- *Chamaedorea elegans* (parlour palm), though a palm, it is quite small and will grow in shade.
- *Spathiphyllum* (peace lily) needs humidity to bloom and can survive in low light areas.



- *Chlorophytum comosum* (spider plant) will grow in these conditions and add a splash of colour from its variegated leaves. Baby 'spiders' look attractive cascading from a hanging basket.
- *Asparagus densiflorus* (asparagus fern) thrives in dim, moist surroundings. Another good plant for a hanging basket.

## FLOWER POWER

- *Begonia semperflorens* flower for long periods from early until late in the year. Give a little direct sunlight in winter and repot each spring.
- *Streptocarpus* (pictured) make superb displays from spring to late autumn. There are many hybrids to choose from and it suits a less-sunny window sill.
- *Senecio cruentus* (cineraria) isn't long lived but has some really large heads of flowers.
- *Asclepias curassavica* (blood flower) has rounded clusters of flowers that open yellow and age to red through summer and autumn and also in winter on a sunny windowsill.



- *Achimenes hybrida* (hot water plant) flowers from June to October in a bright position.
- *Hoya carnosa* is a climber which can be trained around wires in a pot or even in an indoors hanging basket. The flowers are glossy, white star shaped with coloured centres and have a delightful scent. Needs sun.

- Mealybug and scale insects can develop on leaves, stems, buds, fruits and flowers and fruits of many different host plants. Young and mature mealybugs are covered with a dusty white wax, especially noticeable in leaf axils, and plants may be covered with a black sooty mould encouraged by the honeydew they secrete. Scale insects are brown and shiny with no obvious legs. Infestations weaken and distort plants.
- Red spider mite are up to 1mm in length and they and their eggs can be found on the lower leaf surface. Symptoms of attack include a pale mottling on the upper leaf surface and fine silk webbing may be seen. The leaves lose most of their green colour and dry up or fall off. Heavily infested plants are severely weakened and may die.