

# Everything You Need to Know About Indoor Plant Care

Indoor plants enhance our home environments. They bring a bit of the outdoors in and give us lovely accents or focal points for every decorating style. They also provide health benefits. Plants clean the air by absorbing carbon dioxide and releasing oxygen, and they enhance our mood and make us happier. Keeping them healthy and thriving is key.



## Indoor Plant Environment and Basic Care

Lighting, humidity levels, and indoor temperatures are factors in how well an indoor plant will do. Pair those with care requirements such as watering, fertilizing, when to repot, and how to get rid of pests and you have the basics of an indoor plant care guide.

Be warned; once you become a plant parent, it's hard to stop. Use our [houseplant guide](#) to find the perfect indoor plant for your home and care level. Ready to bring one home? Shop all [houseplants and succulents](#).

## Proper lighting for houseplants

Assess the lighting situation in each room. Light is critical because it is essential for photosynthesis, which provides the plant's energy. Most indoor plants need bright, indirect, or filtered sunlight. Sufficient light keeps them looking their best. For foliage plants, it helps them keep a healthy, vibrant color and strong stems. For plants that flower, it helps them bloom. Weak lighting can cause leaves to yellow, stems to grow tall and spindly, and results in reduced or no blooming. It also makes plants more susceptible to pests and diseases.

When buying plants, check the plant tag for light requirements and consider placement in your home accordingly. The light intensity is strongest directly in front of and nearest a window. It decreases as you move a plant to the side of the window or farther away. The intensity of light is also highest in south- or southwest-facing windows and lowest in north-facing windows. West- and east-facing windows provide medium levels of light intensity. Some plants, such as the snake plant and the peace lily, can handle low light intensity quite well. Plants such as crotons and jade plants prefer high light intensity. African violets and Dracaena perform well in medium light.

When natural light from windows isn't available or limited, lighting can be enhanced with **artificial light**. Fluorescent lights or grow lights are good options. The duration of light, such as short days for Christmas cactus, and long days for African violets, can make a difference when it comes to the plant blooming.

After the danger of frost has passed in late spring, indoor plants can benefit from being placed outdoors. Give them a chance to acclimate to the brighter light by placing it in a shaded, protected space.





## Room temperature

Plants can handle indoor temperatures between 58 degrees and 86 degrees F. Missouri Extension recommends 65 to 70 degrees for foliage plants, and 65 to 75 degrees during the day and 55 to 60 degrees F at night for flowering plants.

## Humidity levels

Relative humidity refers to the amount of moisture in the air. Many houseplants are native to tropical regions where humidity is high. Even so, some houseplants need more humidity than others. Plants need between 70 and 80 percent humidity but the typical home is lower than the 30 to 50 percent humidity levels recommended for humans. Consider both the plant and your home's conditions. Cacti and succulents, for example, thrive in low humidity conditions. Ferns and prayer plants, for example, like high humidity.

Because plants are susceptible to drafts and air fluctuations, avoid placing them near heating or cooling vents as they can dry out quickly, causing their leaves to brown. A **humidifier** placed near plants can be helpful. It's often most efficient and effective to group plants together when using a humidifier. Other ways to add humidity include placing plants on a pebble tray or using a cloche or other glass covering. See "**Adding Humidity**" for more details.

## Watering indoor plants

Proper watering is one of the keys to a healthy plant. Just as allowing a plant to become too dry is inadvisable, so, too, is overwatering. With a little observation, it becomes easier to "read" your plants' needs and how often they need to be watered.

The amount of water each plant needs depends on the type of plant, its size, and the container. **Water** the plant until water drains out the bottom of the container. After the water drains into the saucer under the container, empty the water in the saucer. The time of year can alter plants' water needs. Plants grow more slowly in the winter months when the light levels are lowest and, therefore, require less water than during the summer growing season.

## Long-term care

### Repotting

On occasion, plants will benefit from repotting. Plants that are root-bound, which is when plants grow in a thick, tight circle, may need to be watered more often and may lose their luster. One of the biggest clues that it is time to upgrade **container** size is when roots are pushing through the drainage holes at the bottom of the container.

Select a container that is 1 to 2 inches larger than the current container. Avoid going larger than a couple of inches because the extra potting mix needed in a larger container can hold more water than your plant can take up, leaving the roots wet for too long. Add a quality soilless potting mix, gently loosen the plant's roots or lightly trim with clean, sharp scissors if rootbound, then add the plant to the container, gently firming the soilless mix around the root ball.

### Cleaning the foliage

Occasionally, indoor plants that have smooth or waxy leaves benefit from being gently wiped with a soft, damp cloth or sponge to remove dust. For plants with fuzzy, hairy, or prickly surfaces, use a soft makeup brush or toothbrush to gently wipe away any dust.

### Identifying problems

Sound cultural requirements such as proper lighting, humidity, watering, and fertilizing help give indoor plants best conditions for looking their best. If plants begin to have brown tips it may be that they aren't receiving enough water, or it could be due to overfertilization. If the soil feels soggy or waterlogged, that is a sign of overwatering or that the soil is not draining properly. It can result in soil gnats and root problems. If the foliage looks pale and anemic, the plant may need some nutrients or more light.

On occasion, pests such as spider mites, mealy bugs, or scale can be problems. When caught early, they are easier to treat. Mites can be washed off leaves with soapy water. Mealy bugs, which may cover themselves with a white, cottony substance, can be wiped with cotton swabs dipped in rubbing alcohol. Scale can be swiped with rubbing alcohol or scraped off with a fingernail. Cut off any badly infected areas of the plant and discard.

Some houseplants such as aloe, cacti, cast iron plant, and Chinese evergreen prefer the surface of the soil to dry before watering. Others such as Norfolk Island pine, spider plant, and croton prefer an evenly moist soil.



## Soil or growing medium

A good **potting mix** is another essential ingredient to growing indoor plants. Avoid using soil from garden beds in indoor or outdoor containers as it is too heavy and will not drain properly. Instead, buy a good quality, soilless mix for houseplants. Specialty mixes are also available and have been formulated specifically for certain plants. For example, there are potting mixes for succulents and cacti, orchids, African violets, and ferns.

[Learn more about soil types >](#)

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## Fertilizing houseplants

Just like humans, to be at their best, plants need nutrients to thrive. Because watering can leach out nutrients over time, particularly from containers, feeding plants periodically with fertilizer can keep them healthy and thriving.

The best time to fertilize plants is during the growing season, March through September. Cease fertilization during the winter months. Use an all-purpose, balanced fertilizer or a fertilizer formulated for houseplants and follow label directions. Newly purchased plants may have fertilizer already mixed into the potting medium and may not need to be fertilized for a few months.

[Learn more about feeding plants >](#)

### **Fertilizer packaging**

Fertilizer packaging lists three numbers, which refer to the amounts of nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K). An all-purpose, balanced fertilizer, such as 8-8-8, has equal amounts of these macronutrients. It will also contain micronutrients and trace elements.

[Read more about fertilizer numbers >](#)

### **Types of fertilizer**

**Fertilizer** is available in slow release, granular, or liquid or powder forms. The liquid or powder forms that you mix with water are more readily available to plants. The University of Connecticut Soil Nutrient Analysis Laboratory recommends a fertilizer based on how often applications are needed for your plant. If you have plants that need to be fertilized monthly or more often, use a water-soluble powder or liquid. If long intervals are needed, use a slow-release fertilizer.

### **Plant over-feeding**

Too much of a good thing certainly applies to fertilizer. Overfertilization can be harmful to plants. Fertilizers contain salt and, over time, they can build up in the soil. Telltale signs of problems include leggy and overgrown plants, roots and leaf tips that are brown, leaves that are poorly shaped and wilting, and a white crust on the outside of the container or around the pot rim. Leaching out the extra salt or fertilizer is likely needed. Water the plant with large amounts of water until it drains freely from the bottom of the pot. Empty standing water from the pot saucer. Another solution is to repot the plant, adding a fresh, soilless potting mix.