Caring for houseplants in the winter

Source: Rick Durham, extension professor, UK Department of Horticulture

Inside or out, plants go through seasonal cycles in their growth and their needs. Whether your houseplants live inside year-round or just come in to overwinter, they can be undone by things like temperatures, dry air, too much water and limited light.

Many house plants slow their growth rate in the winter or even go dormant, so they need less water to stay hydrated. Providing them with too much water can cause root rot, which can end up killing them. Drought-tolerant plants, such as succulents or cacti, will only need very occasional water depending on how much light they are receiving. Some water every two to three weeks may suffice.

Yellowing and dropping leaves are often a sign of overwatering. On the other hand, rapid leaf drop may be an indication that the plant needs water. You shouldn’t rely on the top of the soil as an indicator about moisture content. The soil surface dries quickly. Instead, plunge your finger into the soil about 1 to 2 inches deep. If it’s dry at that depth, water. If not, don’t and check again a few days later.

Humidity levels in heated houses can be as much as 10% to 20% lower, and many houseplants suffer because of that. There are ways to improve the environment for your plants. First, group them together, because plants transpire moisture from their leaves. By clustering your plants, they can take advantage of that expelled moisture. If you have room and ample light, clustering them together in a bathroom or kitchen is a good idea, because those are the most humid areas of the house.

You could also place your plants next to or above a tray of water. You can elevate your pots above the water in the tray by placing them on stones, so that the bottom of the pots aren’t resting in water. If you have a humidifier, plants will benefit from being placed close to it.

Sunlight, when it shows up at all, hits at a lower angle during the winter, so you may have to move your plants to find more light. Look for a south or west facing window for the best light, but don’t move them too close to that window to avoid drafts.

Finally, don’t worry about fertilizing your houseplants during the winter. In early spring, when new growth starts to appear or the green seems to brighten, resume fertilizing. Until then, let your plant rest and enjoy a long winter’s nap.

For more information about caring for houseplants, contact the (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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