

Indoor Plant Survival Tips

In my former days as a garden center employee customers would see the many beautiful houseplants in our greenhouses and would state that they would love to bring some of them home, but when they did, they had a hard time keeping plants alive for an extended period of time. After discussing what was happening to their plants, it seemed that the plants were often declining because customers would “love their plants to death” by giving them too much water and fertilizer.

A common sign of over-watering is leaves turning yellow and then prematurely falling off. This occurs due to excess water in the soil that causes the plant’s roots to rot away, which inhibits the plant’s ability to take up nutrients (and ironically water) from the potting-soil. Another symptom of over-watering is seeing small black flies (fungus gnats) constantly swarming around houseplants. Excess moisture is needed by these gnats to complete their lifecycle. These flies are usually just a nuisance, but when their population builds, larvae cause damage by feeding excessively on houseplant root systems. Fungus gnats are sometimes hard to control, and the best way to keep them at bay is to not over-water.

The next question I would get after explaining over-watering was “how often should I water then?” This is a loaded question because environmental conditions inside houses and buildings vary greatly and the various species of houseplants have different watering requirements. For example cacti and succulent plants survive in the wild for extended periods of time with little to no water and will do the same in the house. However, plants such as peace lily grow in environments where water is not a limiting factor and can live with roots submerged in nothing but water for a long period of time.

With these two extremes in mind, a general way to decide when to water your plants is simply sticking your finger into the soil two to three inches. If the soil seems dry, place the plant in the sink and allow lukewarm tap water to slowly run over it until the soil is thoroughly saturated. Leave the plant in the sink for an hour or so afterwards to allow excess water to drain away. The good news is that once you have watered you plants a few times, determining when to water them again becomes much easier.

Once the garden center customers found that they could keep their houseplants alive, they were often curious about what plants they could easily grow in their house. This greatly depends on where you plan to put them. Some plants like to be in direct sunlight while others prefer low to moderate light levels. For the most part most common houseplants prefer bright, filtered light, and an average amount of water. Some of the easiest to grow include: dracaena (oftentimes referred to as corn plant or spikes), snake plant (mother-in-laws tongue), various philodendrons, Swiss cheese plant, spider plant, many different ficus trees, croton and Norfolk Island pine.

Plants that grow well in hot areas and full sun include: tropical yucca, aloe, cacti, citrus and jade plant. Conversely, shade tolerant houseplants include: pothos, cast-iron plant, and other succulents.

Another area where I would get many questions included why flowering plants such as chrysanthemums, calanchoe, cyclamen and indoor hydrangeas only last for a couple of weeks indoors before they look ugly. The answer is that these plants and others are often meant to be used as living bouquets and are meant to be discarded after a short period of time. Sometimes though, flowering plants can be kept as house plants if they are grown near a window or sliding glass door and will continue to form new flower buds. My grandfather has done this with several; this should not be attempted with floral chrysanthemums though. If the weather is warm, they can be planted outside and will come back for several years.

There are also some flowering plants that will survive for much longer periods of time in the house. They include several species of bromeliads and African violets. Bromeliads are related to pineapple and are slightly more expensive than other plants. They will last for up to six months, are available in several brilliant colors such as red, yellow and pink, are easy to grow and worth the extra investment. African violets can survive for many years in the house, and there are actually African violet societies for those who really enjoy growing them.