



THE FOGHORN

Winter Care of Houseplants



Winter weather adversely affects growing conditions for houseplants. Proper care during the winter months can help insure

the health of houseplants. Most houseplants grow well with daytime temperatures of 65 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit and night temperatures of 60 to 65 degrees Fahrenheit. Temperatures below 50 degrees Fahrenheit or rapid temperature fluctuations may damage some plants. Keep houseplants away from cold drafts and hot air vents. Also make sure houseplant foliage doesn't touch cold windows.

Many houseplants prefer a humidity level of 40 to 50%. Unfortunately, the relative humidity found in many homes during the winter months may be only 10 to 20%, a level too low for many houseplants. Humidifiers are

an excellent way to increase the relative humidity in a single room or throughout the entire home. Simple cultural procedures can also increase the relative humidity around houseplants. Try grouping plants together. The water evaporating from the potting soil, plus water lost through the plant foliage or transpiration, will increase the relative humidity in the immediate vicinity of the houseplants. Another method is to place the houseplants on trays or saucers filled with pebbles or gravel and water. The bottoms of the pots should be above the water level. Misting houseplants is not an effective method to raise relative humidity. Misting would have to be done several times daily to appreciably raise the humidity level and is simply not practical.

Houseplants require less watering during the winter months than in

spring and summer. Actively growing plants need more water than those at rest during the winter months. Plant species also affects watering frequency. Ferns prefer an evenly moist soil and should be watered frequently. Cacti and succulents, on the other hand, should not be watered until the potting soil is completely dry. The majority of houseplants fall between these two groups. Most houseplants should be watered when the soil is barely moist or almost dry to the touch. When watering houseplants, water them thoroughly. Water should freely drain out of the bottoms of the pots. If the excess water drains into a saucer, discard the water and replace the saucer beneath the pot.

Houseplants need to be fertilized periodically when actively growing in the spring and summer. Fertilization is generally not necessary during

the winter months because most plants are growing very little or resting. Indoor gardeners can begin to fertilize houseplants in March or April as growing conditions improve and the plants resume growth. Fertilizers are available in numerous forms: liquids, water soluble powders, tablets, spikes, etc. Regardless of the fertilizer type, carefully read and follow label directions.

Dust and grease often accumulate on the leaves of houseplants and not only make them unattractive, they may slow plant growth. Cleaning houseplants improves their appearance, stimulates growth, and may help control insects and mites. Large leafed plants may be cleaned with a moist soft sponge or cloth. Another method is to place the plants in the shower or tub and gently wash the leaves. Be sure to adjust the water temperature before placing plants under the shower head.

Garden Guide: Things to Do This Month

- Check young trees and shrubs for rodent or rabbit damage. Prevent injury with fencing or protective collars.
- Use sand instead of salt for icy spots on the sidewalk.
- Brush snow from evergreens as soon as possible after a storm. Use a broom in an upward, sweeping motion. Serious damage may be caused by heavy snow or ice accumulating on the branches.
- Avoid heavy traffic on the frozen, dormant lawn. The crown of the plant may be severely damaged or killed.
- Review your vegetable garden plans. Perhaps a smaller garden with fewer weeds and insects will give you more produce.
- When reviewing your garden catalogs for new vegetable varieties, an important consideration is improved insect and/or disease resistance. Watch also for drought-tolerant types.
- Analyze last year's planting, fertilizing and spraying records. Make notes to reorder successful varieties as well as those you wish to try again.
- Check stored fruits and vegetables such as potatoes and apples for bad spots which may lead to

decay. Remove and use those which show signs of spoiling. Separate others into slotted trays or bins to increase air circulation and reduce decay possibilities.

- To prolong blooms, protect poinsettias from drafts and keep them moderately moist.
- Turn and prune house plants regularly to keep them shapely. Pinch back new growth to promote bushy plants.
- Check all houseplants closely for insect infestations. Quarantine gift plants until you determine that they are not harboring any pests.
- Houseplants and holiday gift plants should not be placed on top of the television. This location is too warm and in most homes too far from windows to provide adequate light.
- During the winter most houses are too dry for house plants. Humidity may be increased by placing plants on trays lined with pebbles and filled with water to within one half inch of the base of the pot.
- Houseplants with large leaves and smooth foliage, such as philodendrons, dracaena and rubber plants benefit if their leaves are washed at intervals to remove dust and grime, helping keep the leaf pores

open.

- If you have some time this winter, paint the handles of garden tools red or orange. This will preserve the wood and make the tools easier to locate next summer when you lay them down in the garden or on the lawn.
- Move garden ornaments such as urns or jars into the garage or basement to prevent damage during the cold winter season. If containers are too large to move, cover them to prevent water collecting in them or turn them upside down during the winter so water will not collect and freeze in them causing breakage.
- Add garden record keeping to the list of New Year's resolutions. Make a note of which varieties of flowers and vegetables do best and which do poorly in your garden.
- Feed the birds regularly and see that they have water. Birds like suet, fruit, nuts and bread crumbs as well as bird seed.
- Do not wait until late in the winter to order seeds. Many varieties sell out early.



After Christmas Poinsettia Care

Quite often people desire to keep their poinsettia plant and reflower it the following year. Even though it is one of the most difficult plants to reflower successfully, it is probably the most often attempted. For those who are persistent enough to follow these directions, which include 2-1/2 months of daily attention to the plant, another Christmas flower show can be produced. Those who cannot provide proper conditions should not attempt to reflower their plants.



Leaves and bracts fall once the flowers pass maturity. After half of the leaves and bracts have fallen off, gradually decrease watering until the soil is completely dry. The plant is then in a dormant state and should be stored in a dark location at 50°F. Water only enough to keep the wood from shriveling, but not enough to promote growth.

If other plants were added to the pot by the florist (usually to hide barren lower stems), remove them before inducing dormancy.

Sources of information for this page: The Poinsettia from Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service Michael N. Dana and B. Rosie Lerner Department of Horticulture and Landscape Architecture. Nebline, January 2006, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in Lancaster County, Nebraska

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