

DIG THIS by Peg Tillery (for 12-24-03) houseplant ideas, ©2005

It seems my December theme is indoor plants. Since I'm on a roll and hopefully you're wanting to stay inside and commune with some plants that like it inside, here are some more tips for selecting and growing houseplants.

The outdoor plant maxim "right plant, right place" applies to houseplants too. Try to find out how your houseplant grows outside in its natural environment. Most houseplants grow in much toastier climates than our northwest affords. Nearly all our houseplants are grown in environmentally controlled greenhouses now, but originally they grew in a desert, rainforest or somewhere tropical or hot.

Before choosing a houseplant do some window-shopping through a few good houseplant books at your favorite bookstores or library. At home or at the library access these four websites for research based information: (Texas A&M) <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/plantanswers/publications/houseplants/houseplant.html>; (University of Illinois) <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu/houseplants/>; (Missouri University) <http://muextension.missouri.edu/xplor/agguides/hort/g06510.htm>; and (Colorado State) <http://www.ext.colostate.edu/ptlk/ptlk1300.html>. Texas A&M includes an encyclopedia of houseplants with color photos.

The Missouri site suggests these "durable" houseplants: Sansevieria (snake plant or mother-in-law's tongue); Philodendron cordatum (heart-leaf philodendron); Pathos (devil's ivy); Dracaena massangeana (corn plant); Peperomia obtusifolia (Peperomia); Aspidistra (cast iron plant); Collinea (dwarf palm); Aglaonema (Chinese evergreen) and Chlorophytum (spider plant). Durable is the perfect word for these houseplants. They all thrive on neglect, withstanding both over and under watering. You could even neglect them for several weeks. They can stand lots of light and also thrive in very low light conditions. If you've never had any luck with houseplants try any of these for success.

More houseplants die from over watering than they do from under watering. When selecting a container for your houseplant make sure there are drainage holes and try to find a container with a separate saucer included. The pots with attached saucers often don't hold enough water when the pot overflows leaving water spots on your furniture. Ideally you might want to place your plant in a sink for watering, letting it drain in the sink for a while. A few plants thrive on humidity though and will appreciate sitting on a saucer full of pebbles with water just barely covering the pebbles.

Our local nurseries, grocery stores and home centers often carry houseplants on a regular basis, especially this time of year. Try to select a plant with a care tag included. Hopefully the care tag will also list the name of the plant and you can do some research about its growing conditions. Check to make sure the plant's soil has not dried out too much. If the soil is very dry (except for cacti), consider the plant dead because it probably will be soon. Stressed plants often croak.

Jiggle the pot or tap it firmly to see if any critters fly away. If that happens, find a bugless plant instead. Check stems for scales (little hard bumps). Look for tiny red spider mites and webbing. If you see white powdery spots or what looks like small white blobs this is usually whitefly so avoid that plant too. You want to try to avoid purchasing plants with these conditions, especially if you have houseplants already. It's a good idea to isolate your new houseplant for a few weeks until you know it is disease and bug free. Most of my plants are in the living room but I usually keep new plants in the kitchen one or two weeks until I know they won't share any critters or diseases with my babies in the living room.

Some houseplants get dusty after a while. If the leaves are smooth you can take the plants into a bathroom for a shower using tepid water. Let excess water drain out before returning them to their regular resting place. African Violets and fuzzy leaved plants do not appreciate this hygiene though. You won't want to use waxes or milk washes on leaves although some gardening lore suggests these tips.

You might receive a grouping of plants as a gift. Usually these groupings combine light and dry seeking plants with shade and moisture seeking plants. You can enjoy the plants as they are for a few weeks or months, but eventually you'll want to find out their individual growing conditions and repot them separately moving each plant to the light it prefers.

I hope you'll try your green thumb on some indoor plants during this winter season. Remember, houseplants are just like outdoor plants in one way – if you kill the plant, make compost. Happy indoor gardening and enjoy this time of holiday gathering with those you love.