

Caring for your sturdy houseplants : easy foliage plants

Foliage plants are tropical plants that grow at the lower levels of tropical forests and jungles and do not need full sun to flourish.

LIGHT: These plants will flourish on most eastern and bright northern windowsills. Southern and western windowsills with full sun will be too sunny for them; but western or southern windows shaded by buildings or by trees year round will also do. In a southern exposure with full sun, locate foliage plants away from the windows where they receive bright light, but not sun, or behind a shade curtain so that full sun does not burn the leaves.

HUMIDITY: Almost all houseplants appreciate higher humidity levels than are natural in our Chicago homes and apartments. You can raise the humidity level around your plants by setting them on a pebble tray or on a humidity tray. Grouping plants of like needs together also helps raise the humidity, as does setting decorative containers of water among your plants on top of the humidity or pebble trays.

WATER: Water your plant when the top of the soil feels dry to the touch. Your plant will love you if you do a complete watering every time you water: place the plant in the bathtub, the kitchen sink, or on a drain board and water the plant with lukewarm water until the water runs out the bottom. (Cold water can shock your plant.) Let your plant drain before you return it to its pebble tray or humidity tray. Depending on your conditions, your plant may need more or less water in the winter. Lower light levels will slow your plant's growth and lessen its need for water, but dry conditions from radiators and heaters may dry out plants out faster than in the summer. Periodically, once every two or three months throughout the year, your plant will appreciate having its soil flushed out—this will get rid of the crusty white stuff that may form on the top of the soil or around the rim of the pot. This white stuff is salt residue accumulated from the salts in the tap water and from fertilizers in the soil. Salt residue is unsightly, and it can also burn the roots of your plant. To flush out your plant, put it in the bathtub or sink and gradually pour several containers of lukewarm water through the soil in the pot, letting it run out the bottom. You can tell when a plant is flushed thoroughly because at first the water draining from your plant may be orange or yellow colored, but later it will run clear. Your plant will also appreciate periodic baths or showers to wash off the dust on its leaves. Never use soap or wax to clean your plant, as these will block the pores on the leaves, just a strong spray or soft cotton balls to clean the leaves.

FOOD: Your foliage plant is potted in a potting soil that contains tiny pellets of slow release fertilizer, and so is not in urgent need of fertilizer, in spite of what plant food containers say. Overfeeding is as bad for plants as for people. Do not feed your plant in winter as it is enjoying a semi rest period. If you wish to feed your plant, chose a liquid plant food for houseplants (not cacti or African violets), mix it with lukewarm water according to directions, and water the plant thoroughly until water drains from the pot, during spring and summer when your plant is in full growth.

Caring for your houseplant in this way can help with Seasonal Affective Disorder (The complete houseplant survival manual : essential know-how for keeping (not killing) more than 160 indoor plants / Barbara Pleasant. North Adams, Mass : Storey Publ. Co., 2006, p. ix). Houseplants in the room can also help work or study productivity and, in NASA sponsored tests, some species remove indoor air pollutants (ibid, p. x-xi).