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For more information,
contact: Jesse Gilmore
Horticulture Agent, Wildcat Extension District
jr637@ksu.edu, (620) 724-8233

Treat Houseplants like Outdoor Plants for Winter Horticulture

With winter rapidly approaching and temperatures dropping, many people get their horticulture fix with indoor plants. Many rules of thumb for outdoor plants also apply to indoor plants. Watering is the most common cause of ill-looking plants, often from overwatering. Potted plants can either be watered from above or below. The entire soil mass should be watered in either case. If from above, water should drain out into the saucer or pan at the bottom. This water should be discarded an hour after watering. If watering from the bottom, the top of the soil turning wet will indicate sufficient watering. Sometimes a crust of salts will form on the top of the soil if watering from underneath. This can be removed, or can be leached out by occasional watering from above.

Fertilizer should only be applied when the houseplant is actively growing, and houseplants that will be discarded after flowering will not benefit from fertilizer applications. Often, plants that lack new growth are suffering from watering or light issues instead of lack of nutrients. Adding a fertilizer to the potted plant about once a month will be sufficient for most houseplants, especially for foliage houseplants that will not flower or produce fruits. Paradoxically, it is always better to under fertilize houseplants than to overfertilize them. This is because the roots are restricted and can be easily burned by the formulation if too much is added at once. Slow-release fertilizers such as Oomycote that add nutrients to the soil over several weeks will be the best way to avoid damaging your houseplant while still adding nutrients to the potting mix.

Take care when placing houseplants near doors and windows. These spots can be drafty, and cold spells can spell disaster for houseplants that are sensitive to changes in temperature. Most plants require a temperature of at least 50 degrees, and a few tropical houseplants such as Chinese evergreen and false aralia need a temperature of at least 65 degrees. It might be necessary to move certain houseplants away from windows or off of sills at night to protect them from cold temperatures.

Some houseplants that are kept outside during the warmer months may lose their leaves when brought inside for the winter. This is normal – research from Florida in the 1970s discovered that tropical plants have different leaves depending on the quantity of light in their growing environment. ‘Sun leaves’ appeared on those plants with long and strong light, and these leaves grew thicker but smaller, and had less chlorophyll to avoid overstimulation. ‘Shade leaves’ were bigger, thinner, less numerous, and had more chlorophyll. The defoliation commonly seen on houseplants around this time of the year is from the shock of being transferred to a low-light environment too rapidly. Plants can convert sun leaves into shade leaves if brought down into lower light in steps. If moving houseplants indoors, keep them in high-light areas like southern windows for 4-8 weeks. The amount of time they will need to acclimate will depend on the light level of the final resting spot for the houseplant. If putting the plant in a darker area, the plant will need to acclimatize longer. Once they’ve been inside for a while, they will successfully transition to low-light areas.

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