

Successfully growing indoor plants

It's not natural for a green plant to live indoors. Most, if not all, of the popular varieties of houseplants are actually tropical plants, best suited to humid and warm climates. Our Pacific Northwest climate, while plenty wet, is hardly tropical. Most commonly available indoor plant varieties may prefer humidity but do not require it. Aside from a few connoisseurs of the art of indoor plant growing who use humidifiers and green houses, most of us are just looking for a little touch of green here and there to liven up the place.

Mother Nature's botanical creatures know one mantra: "I grow." And grow they do, or at least they give it a mighty good try. Originally at home in the balmy tropics, protected by the lush forest canopy, these plants now face the uncertain fate of living on the windowsill in somebody's bathroom. For some, life is good, sustained by regular water and fertilizer, adequate window light and given a temporary move to the counter as welcome refuge from the chill during a cold snap. Unfortunately, others brace for a daily dose of blistering afternoon sun, yearn for a bit larger pot or hope for a drink of water before they've wilted over.

Sound dramatic? It would be if you lived completely at the mercy of a large sentient

being that didn't really understand you, but expected you to thrive or you'd be pitched into the trash. Such is the plight of the humble houseplant.

Successful growth of indoor green plants requires that you choose those varieties that will thrive in your interior environment. If you've been unlucky and dubbed yourself a "plant killer," it is likely due to the plant choices you've made. By simply improving these choices, you'll have more success growing houseplants. Combine this with good advice from knowledgeable professionals and you'll see your black thumb start to turn a lovely shade of green.

When choosing an indoor plant, purchase them at reputable stores that specialize in selling and caring for indoor plants. Not only will you get the best possible advice and a top quality plant, but you'll greatly reduce the risk of buying plants with disease or insect issues. Most garden centers stock a good supply of indoor green plants as well as all the amenities for keeping the plants happy and healthy.

Every region has native plants that are suited to their outdoor environment. But even if anyone wanted to grow a cedar tree or rhody indoors, it wouldn't survive. What grows outdoors in an area will not neces-

sarily grow indoors, for a variety of reasons, including sunlight. Most tropical houseplant varieties thrive naturally in diffused sunlight, making the light from your windows a suitable replacement.

Know your interior light exposure. East and west exposures provide uneven lighting as the sun rises and sets each day. North and south exposures offer the consistent level of light, which is preferred by many indoor plants. Low light plants will grow nicely in high light as well as low, but moderate to high light plants must have precisely that. And please don't confuse providing bright diffused light with hot direct sunlight, which burns foliage.

The Puget Sound is obviously not a tropical region. Our homes are heated most of the year, creating conditions that are dry and warm. This is an acceptable environment for many houseplants. But keep in mind, as the seasons change, so do our thermostats and blowing hot dry air is not a good thing. Best advice: Place your plant in a location with a moderate temperature and away from blowing heat or cool air vents.

A few good candidates for successfully growing plants indoors are those low care, moderate light varieties like Pothos, Spath-

iphyllums (peace lily), Dracaenas, Aglaonema (Chinese evergreen), certain ivies and palms, and Sansevieria (snake plant).

High light choices include: Aralias, Croton, ferns, Ficus, succulents, and any blooming plant with light or variegated foliage.

Watch the water. Most plants die from overwatering as opposed to underwatering. Rather than guessing about when to water, use a moisture meter for best results. Moisture meters are relatively inexpensive and can be purchased in most garden stores.

Fertilize your indoor plant according to each plant's unique needs.

Don't be too eager to transplant your green plant. Most like to be snug in their pots. But if you do, increase the pot size only by an inch or two. Use the proper soil formulated for potting indoor plants. Transplanting can be very traumatic for your houseplant and doing so improperly can cause your plant to die from shock. Find a store specializing in indoor plants. Often, for a small fee you can have your plant professionally repotted, minimizing the risk of plant shock. ■

Information courtesy of Wight's Home & Garden, 5026 196th St. S.W., Lynnwood. Contact them at (425) 775-3636 or visit www.wights.com.

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