

The Indoor Garden

From December to March, there are for many of us three gardens - the garden outdoors, the garden of pots and bowls in the house, and the garden of the mind's eye.

Katherine S. White

During February, "the garden outdoors" may be showing signs of life with snowdrops blooming and fresh green shoots peeping above the ground. Generally though, the ground is still too wet and cold for you to do much work outside. Instead, just enjoy the first signs of spring and concentrate on "the garden of pots and bowls in the house."

Whether you have a veritable jungle of indoor plants covering every conceivable shelf and windowsill or a single, sad specimen gathering dust in a forgotten corner, houseplants are an important feature in any home. Scientific research has confirmed that houseplants remove harmful chemicals from the air, increase feelings of calmness and happiness and, like pets, help lower blood-pressure and impart a sense of well-being. Even if you don't agree with these theories, it can't be ignored that beautiful and well cared for foliage makes your home look decorative, welcoming and luxurious.

Looking after indoor plants can be a little trickier than some of us expect, leading us to believe we cannot keep them alive for longer than a month or two. The most important issue to consider when choosing a houseplant is where it is going to be placed. A plant can't thrive in the wrong environment, but you can dramatically improve its chances of survival by choosing carefully and deciding where you want to display your specimen. The key to success is to choose houseplants that are suited to the conditions you have in your home.

Most houseplants will flourish in a draughtfree, well-lit position, out of direct sunlight. But this is actually quite difficult to find in a normal home, especially if you wish to have more than a couple of varieties in your collection. If you want flowering plants or ones with variegated leaves, these will need more light than plain green foliage plants. Ferns can survive in darker conditions but hate dryness, so would do well in the bathroom as long as there is some natural light.

Another factor to include in your choice of plant is how you look after them. Do you forget to water them for weeks on end, or do you kill them with kindness by watering them every time you pass? Choose plants to suit your particular habit. For those of you who consistently forget to water, try cacti, Mother in Law's Tongue, bromeliads or any fleshy-leaved succulent. If, on the other hand, you tend to overwater your rooted-pets, choose forgiving waterloving plants like ferns, azaleas or arums.



For almost indestructible houseplants that will survive most poor treatment and placement, including poorly-lit rooms, choose an ivy or aspidistra - also known as the Cast Iron Plant for its strong constitution. Some key points for caring for most indoor plants follow, but of course, this won't necessarily apply to all species, so check the label on your new purchase for basic information on how to care for it, but also buy yourself a book for further detailed care instructions to get the most out of your plant.

Wait until compost has almost dried out before watering. Tip out any excess water as more damage is done to the plant if left to stand in water. Feed them regularly, using a good fertiliser. Again, check the specific requirements for your plant as you may need a particular plant food, for example, orchids require specialist food.

Most indoor plants benefit from a humid atmosphere around them. This can be achieved by spraying water over the leaves regularly. Keep them looking respectable by removing dead flowers and cutting off damaged or yellowing leaves. Plants grow healthier with clean leaves, so remove dust with a soft damp cloth. If growth is pale and spindly, move the plant to a lighter spot.

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