

Something More About Houseplants

Published 1/29/20 – Free image titled “32. *Alocasia Lowii* Potted Plant” from a book titled “New and rare beautiful-leaved plants: containing illustrations and descriptions of the most ornamental-foilage plants not hitherto noticed in any work on the subject” authored by Shirley Hibberd and Benjamin Fawcett, 1870.

Last article we covered some of the houseplant basics and things to be aware of when selecting them. We hit the most important factors, light, water, and drainage, and left with the question: Which plants do best where and with how much water?

There are literally hundreds of thousands houseplants available to choose from. Just in the orchids alone there are 30,000 species, but that's not saying they're the best choice for you. Probably not the banana either, but there are plenty of houses in the world that have banana plants in them. So let's start with some of the easier plants to grow successfully.

We'll start with dorm room plants (or the “hey, I forgot I had a plant on the window sill, it probably needs water” plants):

The ZZ (*Zamioculcas zamiifolia*) and snake plants (*sanseveria*) lead the pack as far as not needing a lot of light and like to stay dry. The usual problem with these is root rot from poor or no drainage. If you've never had a houseplant before and don't want anything that require too much care, these are the plants for you. Chinese evergreens (*Algaonema*) need the same conditions but root rot is very common with these because they're often combined with other plants for funeral baskets. To help keep churches and funeral parlors cleaner funeral baskets rarely have drainage.



Next are plants that need to completely dry out between waterings and need lots of light:

Almost all cactus and succulents are top choices. The list of cactus candidates is quite huge and some of these can even produce flowers indoors. Probably most common succulents would be the *Aloe*, Christmas cactus (*Zygocactus* or *Schlumbergera*), and jade (*Crassula*). Rule for success are infrequent waterings but when you do flood them, give them great drainage, and lots of light.

Next collection are plants that only want water when they're dry and need indirect light (treat these like cactus but without direct light):

Most popular, and easiest to recognize are spider plants (*Chlorophytum*), pothos (*Epipremnum*), arrowhead plants (*Syngonium*), and umbrella plants (*Schefflera*). Some cats find spider plants to be mildly hallucinogenic so keep the cats away from operating heavy machinery if they do eat some. Spider plants aren't poisonous but once discovered the only way to keep the cats away is a physical barrier or hanging them up so high that even the most ambitious and enterprising cat would need to hire someone to help them get at the plant.

Last group today are ones that like to stay evenly moist and prefer indirect light:

The wandering jew (*Tradescantia* or *Zebrena*), bird's nest fern (*Asplenium*), and prayer plant (*Maranta*), *Philodendron* top this list. If you're a first-time houseplant owner, be aware that skipping care of these plants over a 2 week vacation can result in a disappointing return home.

Be realistic about your ability to care for plants. Start with one plant that suits the place you have for it, and see how it goes. Not everything will thrive, or even survive, but don't get discouraged. Take the failures to a plant expert and ask what went wrong, so next time it won't. Everything in life has a learning curve, houseplants are certainly not an exception.

Art Smith is a co-owner of East Pierre Landscape and Garden Center, 5400 SD Hwy 34, Pierre