

Something About Houseplants

Published 1/21/20 – Public domain image titled “Snake Plant House Plant” from maxpixel.net

It is possible that the first houseplants were in prehistoric times and were used for medicinal purposes. But I imagine it was a struggle to keep them alive in dimly lit and probably drafty dwellings. Not until the 1600's when clear glass windows came about, and probably not until the 1800's when glass panes were more affordable and commonplace, did it become possible for plants to thrive indoors. Probably related to the eventual understanding of long oceanic voyage related health issues like scurvy, one of the first types of plants grown “under glass” in conservatories was citrus.



There was an eventual transition to using houseplants for very utilitarian medicinal needs to status symbols for the rich. While a small part of that remains, houseplants can be used for food (examples of herbs and sprouts, and if you happen to be a cat some good grass!) but more likely we grow them for companionship and health by purifying our air and helping heal damaged bodies and minds.

All houseplants naturally live outside somewhere and for the majority of these plants controlled house environments are much different than their natural environments. Humidity, light levels, air movement, and soil moisture can be quite different with light and soil moisture amounts usually being the most critical for plant owners to be aware of.

With very, very, very few exceptions, all houseplants need good drainage. Putting a plant in a pot without drainage, even if small stones are put down at the bottom of a pot, usually signifies the start of a slow death. Personal experience has shown that about half of the plants that need “emergency care” are from funerals, and of those the vast majority are or have been in either wicker planters that have plastic liners that do not drain or in a plastic or ceramic pot that does not have drain holes. For the vast majority of plants, when their roots sit in wet soil the roots start to rot. Initially most plant's leaves and stems still look good, or at least OK, when the roots start to rot. If the rot becomes too pervasive there is no recovery.

Pretty much everyone's natural reaction to a plant not looking good is to give it some extra water or maybe fertilizer in addition to the extra water. If too much water is the issue, obviously more is not the answer. Most, but certainly not all plants prefer to have their soil dry out between waterings. For those plants let the top or first inch or so of soil become dry to the touch before watering.

Getting appropriate light levels to plants is sometimes a challenge in some homes. North windows are practically useless for plants but if that is your only option be prepared to install artificial light. Direct light coming from south or west windows is usually too much for most plants; that where you try succulents and cactus. Most plants prefer direct light from east windows and indirect light from south and west windows.

So which plants do best where and with how much water? We're out of space today so please tune in next week for Something More About Houseplants.

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