

# *A Guide to Conquering the Houseplant Jungle*

*Amber Goff, WVU Extension Agent-in-training – Jackson County*

*Raechel Neal, WVU Extension Agent – Putnam County*

## *Educational Objectives*

- Participants will increase knowledge of proper houseplant care.
- Participants will identify easy to care for and pet-friendly houseplants.
- Participants will increase knowledge of common problems and the best remedies.

## **How to Care for Houseplants**

Do you ever look at lush greenery and wish you could bring a bit of that vibrancy indoors? Well, you can! Houseplants are a fantastic way to add life and color to a space, and even fulfill culinary needs. While those beautiful ferns and flowering plants can seem a little intimidating, we have

created a guide to help in conquering the houseplant jungle.

In this lesson, we'll be diving into the care of houseplants to transform you from a houseplant hopeful to a confident plant parent.

### **Light**

Each houseplant requires different amounts of light for growth and development. The most common light requirement is between 12 to 16 hours per day. If your plant was purchased at a nursery, then the plant tag will provide information on the amount of lighting needed. A "bright, indirect light" is light that is bright enough to cast a distinct shadow but does not have sun rays hitting the foliage directly. Rotate plants often so that each side faces the light source to prevent lopsided growth.

- South-facing windows receive the highest light and provide bright direct light all day.
- West-facing windows receive medium light and will receive bright indirect light in the evening.
- East-facing windows receive a low to medium light with bright indirect light in the morning.
- North-facing windows will receive the lowest light and no direct sunlight.



– continued –

---

---

## Soil

When finding soil for your houseplant, make sure you look for a potting mix that is specially created for potted plants. These types of soils have fertilizers in them to supply nutrients. If you use garden soil in indoor containers, it could lead to disease and pest problems. Tip: Wet the potting mix before repotting houseplants to ensure that the plant will absorb water evenly.

## Temperature

While many houseplants are from tropical parts of the world, they don't require tropical temperatures. Most houseplants thrive in daytime temperatures between 70 F and 78 F. It is essential that the temperature doesn't fall below 50 F. Consult the plant tag for specific requirements.

## Humidity

Houseplants need special care when outside temperatures begin to cool because the air inside your home becomes drier. To help with the humidity, move your houseplants to the kitchen or the bathroom where the air is more humid. You can also group plants together.

## Watering

Watering properly is essential to houseplant health. Improper watering is the number one reason people have problems with houseplants. Watering frequency changes depending on factors like light levels, temperature, humidity, type of soil and container, plant size, species and time of year. Instead of watering regularly, you should check for watering needs by simply touching your finger to the soil to determine whether the soil is dry or wet. If the soil is dry, then water thoroughly until water drains out the bottom. If the soil is wet, wait and check again in a day or two. A once-a-week check is usually frequent enough.

## Quick Tips

- **Identify your plant:** Houseplants have different needs for light, water and humidity. Knowing your plant's specific requirements is key to success. Keeping the plant tag from the store will help you identify your plant's needs.
- **Observe your plant regularly:** Look for changes in leaf color, growth patterns, or signs of pests. Early detection can help prevent problems from worsening.
- **Watering:** It's better to underwater than overwater most houseplants. Let the top inch of soil dry before watering thoroughly.
- **Fertilizing:** Use a balanced fertilizer diluted according to package instructions during the growing season (usually spring and summer).
- **Proper Drainage:** Ensure your pot has drainage holes to prevent waterlogging.

## Choosing Plants

### Pet-friendly

**Spider plant:** This easy-to-care-for plant is known for its cascading green leaves and spiderettes that grow along its stems. It tolerates low light and infrequent watering, making it a great choice for beginners.

**Boston fern:** This lush fern adds a touch of elegance to any room. It prefers bright, indirect light and moderate humidity.

**Bromeliad:** Bromeliads come in a variety of shapes, sizes and colors. They are known for their vibrant flowers and air-purifying properties. Most are safe for pets, check the variety before bringing it home.

**Calathea:** These prayer plants come in a wide variety of foliage patterns and colors. They prefer bright, indirect light and moderate humidity.

**Air plants:** These unique plants don't need soil! They absorb moisture and nutrients from the air. They come in a variety of shapes and sizes.



---

---

**Chinese money plant:** This easy-to-care-for plant is known for its round, coin-shaped leaves. It prefers bright, indirect light and moderate watering.

Remember: Even if a plant is considered non-toxic, it's best to keep it out of reach of curious pets who might nibble on the leaves.

## Easy to care for

**Snake plant:** Nicknamed the “indestructible plant,” it's known for its tall, upright leaves with a pointed tip. It thrives on low light and infrequent watering.

**ZZ plant:** A low-maintenance option, the ZZ plant features glossy, dark green leaves. It can tolerate low light and infrequent watering and is generally pest and disease-resistant.

**Pothos:** This vining plant is known for its heart-shaped, variegated leaves. Pothos is very forgiving of neglect and can tolerate low light and infrequent watering. It's also easy to propagate, so you can create new plants to share.

**Jade:** A succulent with fleshy, oval-shaped leaves on thick, woody stems, jade plants thrive in bright, indirect light.

**Philodendron:** This vining plant has dark green, heart-shaped leaves. It prefers bright light but will tolerate low light, but its growth becomes more spindly in lower light.

**Monstera (Swiss cheese plant):** Thrives in bright to medium indirect light. Not suited for intense, direct sun. Water when the top of the soil is almost completely dry. Mist the leaves occasionally and keep them free of dust.

## Activities:

1. Have participants share house plants they have that have been easy to maintain.
2. Have participants share their common houseplant problems.
3. Gather houseplant “babies” and repot or propagate in water for each member.
4. Host a plant swap.

DIY activities: Create a binder to store your plant tags in, macrame planters, hanging basket with embroidery hoop.

## Resources

Kelley, K. (2023, March 14). Caring for houseplants. Penn State Extension. <https://extension.psu.edu/caring-for-houseplants>

Pecknold, Paul C., “Houseplant Problems” (2001). Historical Documents of the Purdue Cooperative Extension Service. Paper 1090. <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/agext/1090>

Pennisi, B.V. (2022, July 21). Growing Indoor Plants with Success. University of Georgia Extension. <https://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.html?number=B1318&title=growing-indoor-plants-with-success#Shopping>

Steil, A., “How to Care for Houseplants” (2023). Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. <https://yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu/how-to/how-care-houseplants#more%20info>

2024

WVU is an EEO/Affirmative Action employer — Minority/Female/Disability/Veteran.

In accordance with federal civil rights law and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) civil rights regulations and policies, West Virginia University is prohibited from discriminating based on race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity (including gender expression), sexual orientation, disability, age, marital status, family/parental status, income derived from a public assistance program, political beliefs, or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity, in any program or activity conducted or funded by USDA.

Reasonable accommodations will be made to provide this content in alternate formats upon request. Contact the WVU Division for Land-Grant Engagement Communications at 304-293-4222. For all other ADA requests, contact Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at [ADA@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:ADA@mail.wvu.edu) or 304-293-5600.



## Common Houseplant Problems and Remedies

Problem	Possible Cause	Remedy
Drooping leaves	Underwatering, lack of sunlight, root rot	Check soil moisture- water if dry. Increase light if appropriate for plant type. Repot if roots are mushy or pot-bound.
Yellowing leaves	Overwatering, nutrient deficiency, lack of light, Pot bound roots	Reduce watering frequency. Fertilize according to plant needs. Increase light if appropriate for plant type.
Brown, crispy leaves	Underwatering, low humidity, excessive sunlight, accumulated salts, root rot	Water thoroughly when soil dries slightly. Increase humidity with humidifier or pebble tray. Move plant further from direct sunlight if necessary.
Leggy growth	Insufficient light, over fertilization	Move plant closer to a brighter window (indirect light for most houseplants). Fertilize appropriately.
Pests (insects, webbing, speckled yellow appearance, sticky leaves or table tops)	Mealybugs, spider mites, aphids	Isolate the plant. Treat with insecticidal soap or neem oil spray.
Fungal gnats	Overwatering, organic matter in soil	Allow soil to dry completely between waterings.
Spots on leaves	Fungal leaf spot, water spots	Keep foliage dry when watering. If infection is light, pick off and destroy infected leaves.
Sudden loss of leaves	Sudden change in environment, root rot	Check soil moisture and reduce watering frequency.
Wilting of entire plant	Root rot or too little water	Pay attention to moisture of soil, being too damp or too dry can lead to wilting.
Plant growth through the roof	You have a green thumb!	Keep up the good work!

