

SOUTH IS NORTH, OUT IS IN

Avoiding tropical trouble with indoor houseplants

Choosing a plant

As you walk through our garden center, do you know how to pick an appropriate tropical houseplant?

In general what you should consider occurs before you even leave your home. Know the site you have first, then choose a plant that will adapt. You should be saying to us, “These are the conditions I have, what would you suggest?”

The biggest mistake we see is that customers find an attractive, unique plant, and they’ll buy it, despite the fact that their homes aren’t suited to it. In general, bright, indirect light, moist soil and warm conditions cover 90% of an indoor tropical plant’s needs.

- Know your light and temperature situation well. You’re taking a plant out of a tropical, lush environment into your home. You need to duplicate those conditions as well as possible for the plant’s best chance of survival.
- Most people have warm, low-light areas in which to place plants; seldom do people have high-light situations in their homes.
- Generally, keep us accountable by choosing only plants that are healthy and vigorous.

While the trend is that Northerners are using tropical plants outdoors as annuals, that doesn’t mean those plants should be moved indoors when colder weather arrives. There are tropical plants in the landscape, but consider them outdoor annuals or conservatory plants—think hibiscus.

- Tropical indoor plants can adapt to indoor culture—consider African violets, orchids, ficus or the trendy African aroids, which are popular for forgetful homeowners. African aroids are tolerant of low-light conditions and forgiving when owners are watering-challenged.
- New cultivars of philodendron, such as Brazil, are earning their spot as indoor-friendly tropicals, as well.



Light

Assume your plant was grown in Florida sun. If you’re in Pennsylvania, you’ve decreased the level of sun, even in full Pennsylvania light. Then, you bring it inside, further decreasing light levels. Perhaps you put the plant by your window, which decreases light levels, as well, especially if the glass is dirty or you have a screen. Obviously, there are numerous ways to lessen light in comparison to the way the plant was grown, and the attempt should be to duplicate original conditions.

- Given that information, plants requiring lower light generally provide you with the greatest success.
- Remember to determine your lighting conditions before coming to the garden center. A rule of thumb is to hold your hand about 12 in. above a piece of paper in the location the plant would be. If your hand creates a defined, dark shadow, you have high-light conditions, if it’s softer, you have a moderate- to low-light environment. Light meters work, as well.
- When you’ve chosen your tropical plant, start it out in the brightest spot possible. If you eventually want it placed farther from the initial location, move it gradually, so it can adapt when you introduce it to a lower-light location.

A problem that may occur is leaf burn, as can occur when the sun shines through glass, magnifying intensity. In this case, if you have window coverings, adjust them using common sense.

- Turn the blinds so the glare of the sun doesn't hit the plant directly.
- Make a conscious effort to adjust the blinds to make sure the plant gets the maximum amount of light, without "offensive" light. On cloudy days, for example, open the blinds completely.

Supplemental lighting, such as incandescent, fluorescent or high-intensity light, can help you achieve conditions more suited to your tropical plant choice.

- High-intensity lighting is closest to that the sun, from 400 watts to 1,000 watts. Using this method, you can grow cymbidium orchids, for example, (plants which require some of the highest light levels) in your basement.
- Incandescent and fluorescent lighting are secondary choices; however, any supplemental light is beneficial if it more closely mimics original growing conditions.

Watering

When tags aren't the most explicit, what exactly does "water regularly" mean?

- A practical idea if you're unsure about watering is to buy a "teaching plant," such as a spathiphyllum. They wilt when they need water; they perk when watered sufficiently.
- Though common plants indoors, steer clear of ficus if you're still learning: They lose their leaves if you over- or under-water, ergo, the plant is done.
- Some sources recommend using distilled water; however, city water should be suitable for your tropical plants.
- Some tropical plants are sensitive to fluoride, such as dracaenas, in which case rainwater is best.
- Overall, ask a garden center employee to elaborate on the tag for specifics.

Hint: On tropical houseplants, leaf burn is a concern due to excess salt buildup. Generally the plants are coming from Florida, with the fertilizer still in the pots. Leach your houseplants by putting them in the shower until the water runs out the bottom, and wait on fertilizing until the next season.

Humidity

- Grouping plants provides increased humidity.
- Misting and placing plants on a humidifying tray mimics their original conditions.
- If you're don't use a humidifying tray, opt for room or whole-house humidifier.

Media

When it comes to growing indoor tropical plants, steer clear of soil.

- Use peat-based vermiculite and perlite products, or soilless mixes, such as Premier Pro Mix or Miracle-Gro Potting Mix.
- Squeeze the bag. If it gives a lot, it's probably more peat based. If there's little give, the product has more sand, therefore it's not suitable for interior plants.

Fertilizer

Remember that the plant most likely has fertilizer in it from the grower; you'll probably do more damage if you apply more.

- During the following season, fertilize high-acid plants, such as orchids or bromeliads, with a triple 20 or a 30-10-10 product. Otherwise, choose a well-balanced fertilizer.

Containers

We're often asked if there's an advantage to plastic, metal, clay or ceramic containers. With interior plants, it basically depends on aesthetics—you can make whatever you like work.

- Given that freedom, however, don't choose a container that's a size off. Opt for one that is akin to the pot size the plant is in currently.
- When potting up, avoid those that are more than 1/3 the size of the container the plant was in previously.
- In general, if you forget to water, choose plastic pots.
- If you water too much, terracotta is preferable because it breathes.
- Saucers. If you water too lightly, you won't leach the salt. If you over-water, don't leave the plant in the saucer of water.
- Choose containers with drainage holes.

Insect control

The most typical pests with interior plants are mealybug and spidermites, although it simply depends on the type of plant. The best option is to give the plant the best interior conditions, as a preventive measure.

- Spidermites like warm, dry, non-moving air, for example, so increase humidity, decrease the temperature and wash the plants in the shower (ideally) once per month.
- Should you detect pests, beneficial insects can clear up the problem, as can insecticidal soap, by drying the shell of the insect. Be cautious in reading the label, and don't apply an outdoor product indoors. 🌿

—Marisa Shoemaker

With special thanks to Karl Gercens, an extension gardener and conservatory display artist at Longwood Gardens, Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, for providing his tropical indoor houseplant knowledge.