

Houseplants

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I love picking a vine-ripened tomato from my garden for a luncheon salad. But I also love living indoors with greenery. A lovely philodendron hanging over the stove, a weeping fig of 20 plus years decorating the corner or a beautiful African violet brightening the bathroom helps make a house a home. Keeping these houseplants thriving does require special care.



A simple Africa violet flourishes in a bathroom environment.
Photo by David Blood

Probably the most important decision is picking the right plant for your circumstances. There are a number of plants that can thrive in a home environment. Generally, they are non-flowering plants and are easily found at places like Ace Garden Center, Home Depot or your local nursery. Flowering plants generally require more care and special conditions. *Philodendrons*, *Plectranthus* (Swedish ivy), *Aspidistra* (cast iron plant), *Sanseveria* (mother-in-law tongue) and *Dracaena* are a few of the heartier plants.

The easiest way to kill a house plant is to overwater. I finally invested in an inexpensive moisture meter to check the moisture level of my houseplants. You can also use your index finger. When the plant is dry to the first knuckle, water thoroughly. Be sure that the pot is saturated. Soon you'll develop a schedule for watering. I check my foliage house plants once a week.

Most foliage plants like bright indirect light near a window. This is not always available. The really tough plants like *Philodendron*, *Sanseveria*, and *Aspidistra* can take lower light. The best approach is to experiment. Keep an eye on your plants. If they need more light, the distance between leaves increases. If the word "spindly" comes to mind the plant probably needs more light.

House plants grow slowly so they need a constant small dose of fertilizer. I use slow-release fertilizers in pellet form like Osmocote. Every time you water, a small amount is released. These slow-release fertilizers last three to four months. It's also possible to add fertilizer every time you water. Add fertilizer to your watering can at 1/4 strength. If a plant appears sick, it's best not to fertilize. When a new plant is brought home from the store it normally does not need fertilizing for six months.

Flowering house plants usually are more demanding. One exception is *Spathiphyllum* (the peace lily) which blooms with only bright indirect light. I grow African violets, and *Streptocarpus* which like the same conditions. I also grow a few orchids but that's another article altogether. Flowering plants need more light and generally are more specific about temperature and humidity. Experiment with different locations in your house around windows. They may need shade in a south window but can take some sun in other locations. Keep them out of drafts and don't let them get too dry. I confess I cheat with the blooming houseplants. I grow mine in a simple light garden in my basement, under a two-tube shop fixture. I then rotate them into the house when they're looking fabulous.

Whatever choice you make for indoor plants, you'll find them bringing a little nature indoors which is a good thing.

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