

HORTICULTURE NEWSLETTER

Jason Graves, Central Kansas District, Horticulturist

December 27, 2010

Care For Houseplants

The new year is almost here! It is a great time to continue preparing and planning for next year's growing season, but don't forget about the plants that still need some attention during the winter months as well. You might have even received a plant or two for the holidays, so here are some considerations for indoor plants during these chilly winter months.

Winter is indeed a difficult time for indoor plants. Many plants enter a rest period during the winter. Winter brings short days, reduced humidity, and low temperatures. Plants often become significantly stressed. The growth of many plants will slow during this period, and some plants may even enter a dormancy period.

The main culprit of this plant stress is low light. The lack of quantity and good quality light will leave plants working hard to survive. You might expect to see your houseplants developing yellow leaves or even losing some of their leaves since they must find a way to cope with winter.

It may be tempting to water your plants more or add fertilizer, but in general this isn't a good idea. Since plant growth is significantly slower during the winter, the use of water and nutrients actually decreases. Supplying too much of either water or fertilizer will damage the plant.

When you water your indoor plants use room temperature water. Before watering a houseplant, use your finger to check the moisture level of the potting soil. For most houseplants water when the soil is dry 1 inch below the surface in a 6-inch pot, or 2 inches below the surface in a 10-inch pot. Then apply enough water to saturate the potting soil so some runs out of the drain holes in the bottom. Make sure it isn't just running down the side where dry potting soil may have pulled away from the side of the pot.

It is not recommended to fertilize indoor plants during the winter season (fall to early spring). This is because the plant will not use very much fertilizer and most likely the fertilizer you apply will sit in the soil where it may create salts that can damage plant roots.

The best thing you can do for your houseplants is to place them where they will have the most available light. This will give them the best opportunity to come through the winter months strong. Try to be aware of temperature extremes during the winter season though since some plants may be particularly sensitive to cold drafts, or cold window panes. In addition, the warm, dry heat of home heating systems may cause plants to dry out faster than usual.

Some people like to add artificial light, but this is usually not very practical for the typical homeowner. Any artificial light must be close (around 1 foot) from the plant and be on continuously for at least 12 hours at the minimum to do any good.

Be patient with your plants and wait for spring. Once the spring time returns these plants should begin growing vigorously again. Give them some fertilizer and adjust your watering routine once again to compensate for a faster growing plant and you will be ready to grow!



Jason Graves, Horticulture Extension Agent
K-State Research and Extension, Central Kansas District 3
Phone: 785-309-5850 E-mail: jlgraves@ksu.edu