

Ask a Gardening Question:



The Most Common Problems with Indoor House Plants in Winter

Sources: 'The House Plant Expert' Hessayon; '10 Common House Plant Problems' Deardorff; & Various others. Photos: Stock

Compiled by: Halton Master Gardeners

1. Overwatering!!!

The most usual cause of plant death in winter is **overwatering**. The leaves droop and so we water more and leaves begin to yellow and drop. (Drought also causes leaves to wilt and drop but dryness usually causes shriveling and browning.) In severe cases root rot can develop and plants collapse.



Most plants require less water during their dormancy in winter. Never leave plant pots sitting in a saucer of water. You can raise the pot above the water by sitting it on a layer of pebbles. Always allow the soil to dry out between watering. Check the soil with a fingertip to detect presence of moisture before watering.

2. Air is Too Dry

During the winter the air in our homes can be as dry as a desert. When the tips of leaves begin to show brown spots shaped like inverted V's, they are telling you the air is too dry.



Try to keep all house plants away from heat registers and radiators. Here's some things you can try: -Close the heat vent near plants. -Mist the foliage regularly with a spray bottle of water. -Set plants on a tray of pebbles and water.

3. Not Enough Light

Light levels in most homes in the winter are quite low and this can result in pale foliage, weak growth and no flowers. This is particularly true of house plants that have spent the summer outdoors in higher light levels. Shock often results causing plants to droop and leaves to fall off.



It is normal for plants to lose some foliage with a decrease in indoor light levels. When bringing plants inside, prune them back by about 1/4 of the stem lengths. Select house plants that are suited for low light conditions or supplement light artificially.

4. Insect Pests



Whiteflies



Spider Mites



Scale



Fungus Gnats



Mealy Bugs

Insects are often brought into the house on newly purchased plants or from outside when bringing in pots for the winter. Keeping plants healthy with the correct light, moisture and temperature is the best preventative. Inspect stems & underside of leaves regularly. Spraying with insecticidal soap & rinsing 3 X in 10 days will remove spider mites and white flies. If caught early, Mealy Bugs can be removed with a soft cloth or cotton swab.

A Cotton Swab & rubbing alcohol will soften scale so that it can be removed with a rough cloth. Mulch can reduce fungus gnats.

5. Diseases—Fungus, Bacteria, Virus



Powdery Mildew



Leaf Spot



Virus

Powdery Mildew is a fungus which grows on the surface of the leaves. Remove the affected leaves; spray with a fungicide and improve air circulation by not crowing plants too close together.

Leaf Spot can be caused by both fungus and bacteria. Remove affected leaves; spray with a fungicide. Keep plant foliage dry for several weeks. Virus has no single symptom. Growth may be stunted and stems distorted. Leaves may have pale green or yellow spots or patches. There is NO CURE. Throw the plant away. Always check new plant material carefully for signs of problems before buying.