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M1159 Cooperative Extension Service
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Extension Division

HOUSE PLANT CULTURE

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House plants provide a fine opportunity for a person to practice his gardening skills during the entire year. They add beauty and life to the home and make it a much more pleasant place in which to live.

Culture of House Plants

Containers, Soil, and the Potting Operation

Many types of containers may be used for house plants as long as they (1) allow good drainage, (2) have neutral colors which will not detract from the plant, and (3) are as small as possible to hold the root system and yet support the plant. Glazed or plastic containers are as satisfactory as red porous clay pots, as long as good drainage is provided.

A good general purpose soil mixture is prepared by using 2 parts soil, 1 part shredded peat, 1 part coarse sand or perlite, and 1/2 part dried manure or leaf mold. A high humus sandy mixture may be prepared as above but use only 1 part soil. The soil should be sterilized by baking for one hour at 200° F., or by using a soil fumigant in a closed container, following the instructions on the package.

A good mixture for growing seedling plants can be made from equal parts of shredded peat moss, No. 2 horticultural grade vermiculite, and perlite, plus 8 oz. of ground limestone, and 8 oz. of 5-10-5 fertilizer per bushel. In measuring the lime and fertilizer, one cup equals about 8 oz. This mixture may be given a more enduring nutrient supply, and used for potted plants, by adding 6 quarts of dried manure per bushel of the above mixture. This mixture usually will be free of disease, insects, or weed seeds, and may be used without sterilization.

When potting house plants use an inch of gravel or crushed stone over a piece of broken crock in the bottom of the pot to provide drainage. Leave 1/2 to 1 inch of space at the top for watering. Small plants may be placed in 4-inch pots, medium sized plants in 6-8 inch pots, and large plants in 10-12 inch pots.

Light, Air, Temperature and Water

Foliage plants will grow satisfactorily under conditions of moderate light. Flowering plants need relatively high light intensity and should be located where they will receive as much sunlight as possible without being in direct hot sun which may cause foliage burn. The Gro-Lux fluorescent lights will promote satisfactory growth of foliage and seedling plants, and the flowering of shade-loving plants like African violet. For sun-loving plants like geranium it is desirable to combine fluorescent and incandescent lights.

The air should be fresh and humid as possible. The humidity around the plants may be increased by placing the pots on crushed stones in a tray containing water. The pots should not be in the water because the soil would remain saturated and result in poor growth and possibly stem rot.

A daytime temperature of not above 70° F., and a night temperature of about 60° F. is best for most house plants.

Spray the foliage of glossy leaved plants frequently with a bulb sprayer, with water at room temperature. This operation may be performed in the kitchen sink or bathtub to avoid damage to carpets or furniture.

The water used for house plants should be at room temperature. Best growth will usually be secured by moderate rather than excessive watering. Provide good drainage to reduce the possibility of overwatering. Watering can be simplified and air humidity increased by setting pots on pans of wet coarse sand, fine gravel, or crushed stone.

Fertilizer, Grooming and Training

Plants in a fertile soil mixture will need no additional fertilizer for several months after potting. Fertilizer may be needed at about monthly intervals for established plants. Use a soluble house-plant fertilizer which may be secured from your florist or garden center.

House plants should be groomed regularly to keep them attractive. The following operations are suggested: (1) Remove dead or damaged leaves and flowers, (2) Pinch back long branches to maintain a symmetrical plant, and (3) Stake tall plants with sticks and ties which blend with the foliage color and do not extend above the top of the plant.

Disease and Insect Control

Disease and insect problems usually are not serious on house plants which have been potted in sterilized soil, and which are maintained in a vigorous state of growth by proper watering and fertilization. Discard plants which are damaged by stem rot or serious foliage diseases. Most insects will be controlled by regular washing of the foliage and stems with soapy water, or spraying with malathion. The most common disease of house plants is root-rot caused by overwatering.

Qualities Needed for House Plants

House plants should be robust with a high tolerance of the light, temperature and humidity conditions found in the average home. Foliage plants are easier to grow in the home than most flowering plants. They tolerate wide extremes of temperature and humidity, and make good growth in poor light.

Flowering plants need cooler growing conditions, more light, and better control of water and fertilizer than foliage plants, if they are to produce a good crop of blossoms.

Some of the more commonly grown flowering house plants are: African violet, amaryllis, begonia, calla, Christmas cactus, fuchsia, geranium, gloxinia, impatiens, kalanchoe, lantana, and orchid. Several tender and hardy bulbs may be grown as house plants including cape cowslip, grape hyacinth, hyacinth, Iris reticulata, Lily-of-the-Valley, narcissus, and tulip.

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