Tips for Watering Houseplants

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

While it would not seem so, watering houseplants can be challenging, especially during the winter months. Lower light levels reduce plant growth so plants without supplemental light are using less water as are those in the cooler areas of the home. To keep warm, we turn up the heat. Plants near the heat sources whether vents or baseboard heaters tend to dry out quicker than those farther away. Rooms with wood or pellet stoves feel nice and cozy to us but if constantly used, plants in those areas may require more frequent waterings. Also, since heat rises, hanging plants may need to be watered more as well.

How often should your plants be watered? That depends on a number of variables. Some plant species like the soil to be moist at all times while others prefer that the potting mix dry out between waterings. This may be especially true during the winter when plants are not actively growing and not requiring as much water. Look up your plants cultural requirements online or in houseplant care books or call us.

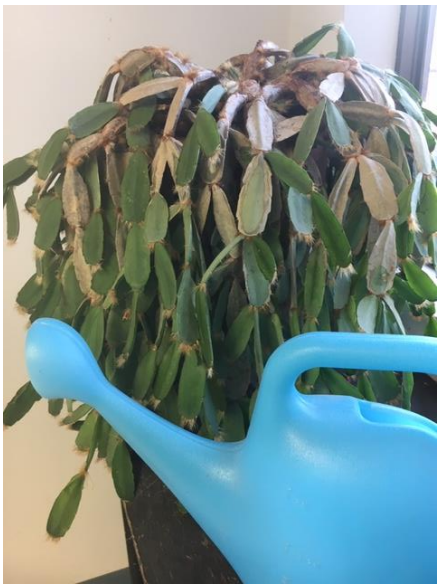
Think about the size and composition of the container your plant is growing in. Plants in clay pots typically dry out faster than plastic pots because not only is water evaporated from the top of the potting mix but some moisture is also lost through the sides of the porous pots. Houseplants in pots that are placed in decorative ceramic cachepots may take longer to dry out between waterings. As a general rule of thumb, the smaller the pot, the more frequently the plant will need to be watered.

Consider the size of the plant relative to the size of the pot. Those that are on the pot-bound side will need more water than ones in more spacious rooting quarters.

For most plants, the easiest way to tell if it needs water is to stick your finger about an inch down into the potting mix. If it feels dry, give your plant a good watering. Ideally, most plants on the dry side should be given a thorough watering. Add enough water so that it fills the pot and after a minute or so, the excess drains out into the saucer. Wait until the water stops accumulating and drain the saucer. Try to figure out the number of days in between waterings that it takes for the soil to feel dry about 1 inch down again and come up with a tentative watering schedule for that plant.

My favorite way to tell is by weight. This works best, of course, with small to medium sized pots. After watering, lift your pot to feel its heft and remember it. In a few days, lift it again. Does it feel almost as heavy or very light? If on the light side, add enough water to saturate the potting media and the excess begins to run out into the saucer. Note the number of days between waterings.

Depending on the number, kinds and size of pots, you might be able to pick a couple of days each week to check your houseplants for water. A little experimentation might be necessary. Regardless of their weights or dry soil, succulents might just need water once every 2 or 3 weeks. Sealed terrariums maybe once every 2 or 3 months but some plants might need to be checked and even watered daily.



It might be hard to believe but the number one killer of houseplants is overwatering. If you are prone to this proclivity then maybe it would be best to select plants that either appreciate or tolerate an abundance of water.

Two that foot the bill are lucky bamboo (*Dracaena sanderiana*) and the umbrella plant (*Cyperus involucratus*). Lucky bamboo is a popular florist items with leafed stems sold in decorative containers that keep the bottom half of the stem submerged. Turn plants regularly as they bend toward the light.

The umbrella plant belongs to a group of rush-like plants that inhabit the edges of lakes and other waterways. Thin grass-like leaves surround 2 to 4 foot flower stems each year. Look for the dwarf variety 'Gracilus' for indoor growing. Plants enjoy full sun to part shade. For almost every other houseplant, you would be advised to empty any standing water in saucers. For this plant, you need to keep the saucers filled.

Aside from the above two species which grow well in water, there are quite a few common houseplants to select from that tolerate overwatering to a degree. They include asparagus ferns, pleomele, spathiphyllums, Swedish ivy, Tahitian bridal veil, spider plants, pothos English ivy, anthuriums and philodendrons. Their ability to withstand waterlogged conditions is somewhat dependent on indoor temperatures. When the potting soil is saturated and plants are subjected to cool temperatures, the roots will use up the water more slowly and the plant could become subject to root rots and other diseases.

Pay attention to your plants' watering needs now that the heat is blasting and winter winds creep in poorly insulated doors and windows causing drafty areas. Choose plants that will grow well in the conditions you offer.

For the cultural requirements of specific houseplants and advice on watering or other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.