Norfolk Island Pine

*Araucaria heterophylla*

The graceful houseplant that we know as Norfolk Island Pine bears little resemblance to the 200’ giants that Captain James Cook first sighted in 1774 on the island in the South Pacific that gave the plant its name. A few years later, the British Royal Navy considered these majestic trees for use as mainmasts, when the supply of shipbuilding timber from the New England colonies halted due to the Revolutionary War. Unfortunately, the Norfolk’s wood proved too brittle. Today it is a popular ornamental tree in warmer regions of the world, but because of its vulnerability to lightning and tendency to snap in high winds, planting is restricted in some areas, particularly hurricane-prone South Florida.

In indoor culture, *A. heterophylla* is a dependable foliage plant which will remain attractive for years when given proper care. “Heterophylla” (different leaves) refers to the distinct transformation that the plant makes from juvenile to adult. As a houseplant, it will continue to maintain the soft, appealing texture of the juvenile form.

A small plant is effective when displayed on a table or desk by a window. With proper culture, it will develop to a size suitable for a floor planter or tub and can serve as a decorative room feature. A larger specimen will appreciate spending the summer outdoors on a shaded patio.

**Light requirement**

Position the Norfolk Island Pine in an open, bright location, but not in full sun. It’s tolerant of low light, and will thrive in locations where many foliage plants requiring more light would not grow satisfactorily. Natural light may be supplemented by either fluorescent or incandescent sources. Providing adequate light produces plants with denser, more compact growth; plants with insufficient light will tend to get leggy. When moving a plant outdoors in the warm weather, choose a site in bright shade, protected from the strong afternoon sun.

**Temperature**

Norfolk Island Pine is adaptable to the normal range of interior temperatures for living spaces. When used as a patio plant, bring the plant indoors when nighttime temperatures begin to regularly dip into the 50s.

**Moisture**

Soil should be kept moist, but not wet, for Araucaria. Too much moisture may cause roots to rot, especially at lower nighttime temperatures. As with most foliage plants, Norfolk are more attractive with shorter spacing between branches. As with all plants, the soil mixture, type and size of pot, size of plant, average room temperature, and amount of light received all influence the amount and frequency of watering required. Overwatering is probably the major cause of house plant failure. The rule of ‘moist but not wet’ will provide a steady supply of moisture without
injuring plant roots. Araucaria will benefit from the increased humidity produced by grouping houseplants, or from a tray of pebbles and water under the plant. Be sure the pot is sitting on the stones and not touching the water in the tray.

**Fertilizer**

Two light applications a year of a liquid house plant fertilizer should keep Norfolk Island Pines green and growing at a moderate rate. Make a dilute fertilizer solution by mixing 1 ½ teaspoons of a 15-15-15 soluble fertilizer (or 1 tablespoon of an 8-12-4 soluble fertilizer) per gallon of water. The analysis will appear on each container of fertilizer and represents the percentage of nitrogen, phosphorus and potash, respectively.

**Potting**

Newly purchased plants usually will not need repotting for a year, by which time they may outgrow the original container. Repotting is also a method for encouraging new growth on plants which may have been damaged by overwatering or adverse growing conditions. Use a good commercial soilless mixture made with peat moss and perlite or vermiculite. Plant size can be limited, if desired, by limiting pot size. Repot once a year, removing depleted potting medium from the outside of the root ball, and replace with fresh soil.

**A Living Christmas Tree**

Consider using the Norfolk Island Pine when decorating for the holidays. Plants can be trimmed with ornaments and placed on a mantle or dining table, either singly or grouped for greater impact. As a holiday project, children can decorate their own tree with miniature lights and ornaments that they’ve made themselves. Norfolks make thoughtful and lasting gifts for students or apartment dwellers with limited space for a Christmas tree.

Despite good cultural practices, pests and diseases at times may appear. Chemical control should be used only after all other methods have failed.


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