Help Your Houseplants Beat the Winter Doldrums
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About this time of year many of our houseplants are beginning to show signs of winter’s wear much as we are. Short days, low light levels and dry, heated homes cause tropical plants to slow down growth activities and we need to respond to their decreased needs appropriately.

Watering schedules especially may need to be adjusted. Plants in cool locations will need to be watered less often. During periods of slow growth, they do not take up as much water. Roots need both water and oxygen to function. Saturated potting mixes reduce the amount of pore space filled with air. Plant roots require oxygen to take up water and nutrients.
Symptoms of overwatering include wilting of plants even when the soil is moist, stunting, rotting crowns, black edges or spots on leaves. On some plants, small brown blisters will appear on the undersides of leaves.

Knock plants with suspected overwatering problems out of their pots and examine their roots. Overwatered and rotting roots will look blackened. Replace the potting media with a better draining mixture containing perlite or coarser textured bark particles. Trim damaged roots before repotting and only water when the potting medium begins to feel dry. With luck, your plant will recover.

At the other extreme are plants subjected to continuous hot and dry conditions as we run our furnaces and wood stoves during the cold weather. Hanging plants dry out most rapidly as warm air rises. They may need to be watered 2 or 3 times a week. Since how fast a pot dries out depends on several factors including its size, whether the pot is made of plastic or clay, the size of the plant’s root ball and how often we are running the heat, plants need to be checked frequently. Stick your finger in the potting mix and water thoroughly if it feels dry. If possible, keep plants away from heat sources.

Another problem with heated indoor winter conditions is low humidity. Some plants are quite tolerant of dry air. Others may exhibit leaf and/or bud drop. Leaves may curl under and crack or die back along the edges. Grouping plants together raises the humidity as does setting pots on trays filled with pebbles and water. The water level should be below the pots’ bottoms. A humidifier is another option, which can make both you and your plants more comfortable.

Low light levels are difficult to deal with unless you want to consider supplemental lighting. Pale leaves and spindly stems indicate insufficient light. Many plants that do well in north and east windows in the summer can tolerate and even welcome full sun during the winter. Move plants to the brightest location possible. Even placing them under regular incandescent lights for a few hours each day will help.
Be sure to clean dust from houseplant leaves with a damp cloth or in the case of hairy leaves, a soft brush. Dust can cut down on light absorption by 25 percent or more. During these winter days of minimal light, every bit is essential. As many houseplants do brighten our winter months, see what you can do to brighten theirs.

For information on houseplant care or any other home or garden topic, 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.