

Wally's Weekly News 5th July 2008
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WINTER INDOORS

With some miserable weather covering much of the country recently, now is a good time to look to those plants that we grow indoors which we commonly call house plants.

House plants not only brighten up the indoors they also assist in purifying the air we breath, converting carbon dioxide to oxygen and filtering out harmful air borne substances.

A very valid point to remember as the owner and care giver of indoor plants is that house plants are solely dependant on us for their well being. We supply the moisture that they require along with nutrients in the form of plant foods and where we place them in a room will depend on how much natural light they receive.

Winter can be a hard time for house plants if you are not very careful about the amount of water you provide. Many plants are lost in winter as a result of root rots through over watering.

This even applies in a heated room where a plant that hates wet feet, is sitting in a saucer that is full of water, which means that the potting mix is saturated.

When we turn off the heat the room quickly chills making it very uncomfortable for the plant and as there is a lack of air around the roots they soon begin to rot.

In the warmer months with longer day light hours the plant is able to use the water and evaporation rates are higher also, which means the root rot problem will not occur unless we continue to over water.

In winter the secret is to give your house plants a small drink of water on the average of once a week.

This may vary with plants that are pot bound and need a bit of a top up before the weekly watering comes around. The plant will tell you as they go into water stress through lack of moisture, foliage and flowers will begin to droop indicating that the mix has become too dry.

(Note; drooping flowers and foliage can also be displayed when a plant has been over watered)

A quick test is to lift the pot up and if it feels light then all is ok and a small drink maybe applied.

If the pot feels heavy and there is water in the saucer then it is too wet and needs to be dried out by placing it in a warm room and not giving any further water till it is light in weight.

It is surprising how light the container can become before any sign of water stress is displayed.

Plants that are in rooms not normally heated may only require a small drink every 2 to 4 weeks to keep them happy in winter.

The amount of natural light that a plant receives indoors in winter is also another important aspect to its well being.

We are down to about only 8 hours of daylight at this time and through a window the brightest light is within one metre of that window. As we move across the room the light level dramatically drops, something we don't notice but plants do.

There are a number of house plants such as philodendrons with their larger leaves that adjust to lower light levels very well. Smaller leaf plants such as maidenhair ferns need a really bright light and to be within a metre of a good bright light window to do well through the winter months.

A quick guide to the amount of light a plant needs is by the size of the leaves, generally speaking small leaf plants need better light levels than do large leaf plants. Indoor plants that are in flower need ample bright light by being placed very near to a bright light window. If there is insufficient light they may either not flower at all, or produce flower buds that fail to open and eventually fall off the plant.

Cyclamen are a neat winter flowering plant for winter as they like the cold. Indoors they will not do well in a heated room unless you place them right on a window sill where it is cooler.

You can move them onto the coffee table when visitors are coming, to make them a star attraction but once the visitors go, back onto the window sill or even better pop them outside on the porch by an entrance way.

African Violets are another neat flowering plant that does not require a high level of light, instead they require very long hours of light, which includes your indoor lighting.

Given 12 to 16 hours of light every day they can keep on producing flowers all year round.

Poinsettias are the reverse as they flower when the daylight hours are short and will flower for you this time of the year if they only receive natural light without having their light hours extended by artificial light.

The red leaf poinsettias that one finds in the shops coming up to Xmas have been forced to flower out of season. By the way the red leaves that we may think are the flowering are not, as they produce small short lived unattractive flowers at the axis of the leaf bracts.

I have currently two red leaf poinsettias sitting on a window sill in the lounge, when the curtains are pulled at night they do not receive any artificial light and thus they are giving a neat display of red leaves. No longer are they squat as they were when purchased, as the nurseries use dwarfing hormones on the plants to produce the dense, squat plants we buy.

Once the hormone treatment wears off they become natural again and even a bit leggy if we don't trim them back now and then.

One house plant that is very hardy and can suffer over watering is the Spathiphyllums with their sword like dark green leaves and their white flowers which are often referred to as the Peace Lily.

Spathiphyllums resent direct strong natural light and will do well, away from the windows, as long as the spot is not too dark. They are also a plant that can live very happily under water in a fish tank that has a light above it.

House plants often are attacked by the pest insect, mealy bugs which live both in the root system and also in the foliage. They are white and look a bit like strings of cotton wool both on the foliage and in the root system. The best treatment is to plunge the container into a solution of Professor Macs 3 in 1 for lawns to kill the pests in the root zone. The mealy bugs on the foliage can be sprayed with **Neem Tree Oil**.

Scale and a few other insect pests can also be found on indoor plants and **Neem Tree Oil** is ideal for their control.

Take the plants out to the shed and spray them there so as not to affect wall paper or furnishings. Leave for a few hours and return them to their spots indoors.

As house plants are not actively growing in the winter there is no need to worry about feeding them till the spring.

Flowering house plants on the other hand will do better with a little plant food such as **Matrix Reloaded**.

Take care of your house plants and they will give you pleasure for many years, my

oldest are now over 30 years old.

Problems ring me at 0800 466464 (Palmerston North 3570606)