

Plant Rx for Winter Blues

Psychologists say the weeks following the holidays can be a very depressing time of year, even for the healthiest among us. Keep the 'blues' at bay this winter by surrounding yourself with lush and beautiful house plants. No kidding, indoor plants can really chase the blues away. Not only do they filter the air we breathe, making our interior environments healthier, but they can improve your mood and productivity. Studies show that just four minutes of viewing plants, indoors or out, reduces blood pressure, respiration rate, and the production of stress hormones and mood improves.

If you think you don't have enough natural light indoors to grow plants, think again. Here is my list of the best low-light tolerant indoor plants that can survive in almost 'cave-like' conditions. And why not select double-duty foliage plants; those that require low light but are also the best for filtering indoor air. I've asterisked the plants that NASA scientists have discovered help remove formaldehyde and other impurities in your home for a safer, cleaner atmosphere. For the best results, put as many plants as you can care for in the rooms you use most, says environmental scientist Dr. Bill Wolverton. He recommends at least two plants (in 10- to 12-inch pots) per 100 square feet of space.

Blue Rabbit's Foot Fern - *Phlebodium pseudoaureum*

Cast iron plant - *Aspidistra elatior*

* Chinese evergreen - *Aglaonema*

* Cornstalk dracaena - *Dracaena fragrans* 'Massangeana'

* Dumb cane - *Dieffenbachia*

* English ivy - *Hedera helix*

* Golden pothos - *Epipremnum aureum*

* Heart-leaf philodendron - *Philodendron*

* Janet Craig dracaena - *Dracaena deremensis* 'Janet Craig'

* Lady palm - *Rhapis excelsa*

* Mother-in-laws tongue - *Sansevieria*

* Parlor palm - *Chamaedorea elegans*

* Peace lily - *Spathiphyllum*

* Red-edged dracaena - *Dracaena marginata*

* Spider plant (*Chlorophytum comosum*)

* Warnecke dracaena - *Dracaena deremensis* 'Warnecke'

* Weeping fig - *Ficus benjamina*

Make sure you get a good dose of 'green' medicine this winter and add a few interesting houseplants or revitalize those specimens you banished to poorly lit corners. Here's how I get a good dose of 'green' medicine while keeping my houseplants healthy and lush.

Water Water, Not

Proper watering is the key to a plant's wintertime survival. Decreased light levels during this season make plants less thirsty for water than during the brighter seasons of the year, so, I am careful not to be too generous when watering. Overwatering is the number one reason why most houseplants die.

Rather than watering on a weekly schedule, I check my plants' needs. I use two ways to see if my plants need water. First, I check the soil color. Moist soil looks like dark chocolate, while dry soil appears the color of milk chocolate. (Chocolate provides its own mood-enhancing qualities, but I water my plants before I tend other indulgences.) Study your plants' soil before and after you water to see color differences so you can recognize when your plants are dry.

If I am unsure about the soil condition, I test the soil with a pencil to determine if it is dry. This works like a cake tester. If soil sticks to the pencil when it is inserted several inches into the pot, then the soil is moist enough and I do not water. If the pencil comes out clean, then it's time to give the plant a drink.

When watering your plants, be sure to wet the entire soil mass, not just the top inch. Add water until it comes through the drainage hole in the bottom of the pot. Discard water that remains beneath the pot one hour after watering.

Another way I keep my plants vibrant is to give them a shower. This is an easy way to clean dirt and dust off their foliage and to flush their soil of built-up minerals. It's a good time to inspect the foliage for insects as well. Be sure to look under the leaves and along the leaf petioles and stems for scale, mealy bug, and spider mite insects. None of these pests likes water. I use my removable shower head and its hose to spray all the foliage from underneath. Good water pressure will literally blast some insects away.

If you find insects, you can spray the plant with either a mild solution of dish detergent and water (1 tsp./gal.) or an insecticidal soap purchased from a garden center. I like to take a sponge or rag with either solution and wipe off the scale or mealy bug insects and then rinse the plant in the shower. The plants seem to appreciate a warm-water cleansing and they look better with clean, bright foliage.

No Food, Either

In winter, fertilizer can be too much of a good thing for houseplants. While light levels are low and plants aren't as thirsty, refrain from feeding your plants. I start providing liquid fertilizer again in March when light levels start to increase and the plants begin to actively grow. Even then, I add fertilizer just every other watering. Whatever fertilizer you select, be sure to follow label directions. When it comes to plant food, it is better to be frugal than to damage your plants by being too generous.

Location, Location

Finally, I enjoy my houseplants as houseplants. I don't move them outdoors for the summer. If you are experiencing success with your plants indoors, why knock a good thing? Sure, your plants will grow more vigorously outdoors, but many don't adjust well when they return to the interior environment in the fall. Besides, I'd rather enjoy the aesthetics and the healthier environment they provide inside year-round.

So, whatever your pleasure – ivy or palm – try indoor gardening to ward off the winter blues. You'll find me tending my oversized Chinese evergreen!