

Recently I moved from my home of 30+ years to an apartment in a retirement community. Now, instead of struggling to maintain an outdoor landscape I can work with a new indoor landscape on four windowsills which measure 34' x 8" each. Early in my adult apartment life, I had all types of houseplants crammed into about the same amount of space. I acquired plants from all sorts of places. They came from the five and dime, from the grocery store, from specialized plant stores and from friends. Some were run of the mill, some were quite exotic. Some had flowers, some had pretty leaves, some had an unusual structure, some were expensive, some were free, some lived, some died. All were appreciated and enjoyed. The much younger version of myself never thought about what a plant needed or didn't need to survive on my windowsills, I just experimented and did the best I could. Now I know better. Now I will be a little more deliberate in the care of my houseplants.

Houseplants have needs. They need good soil, light, moisture, the proper temperature and nutrition. With storage and work space at a minimum, I should purchase bags of potting medium as I need them. Commercial potting mediums contain peat and perlite with added with fertilizer. When choosing a bag of potting mix, read the label. It will tell you what is in it and how long the included fertilizer will last. I prefer a soil-based mix, because although it is heavier, I find that it absorbs water easier and gives a sturdier base for my plants. So, I am going to mix my own potting medium in small quantities and hope I can store it neatly somewhere on the patio. That mix is one part each of bagged garden soil (so there are no weed seeds), damp peat, and perlite (or coarse sand). Time will tell if I can mix my own or if I will be using the commercial variety.

Some plants can exist with low level light, some need high level light. The amount of light a plant gets is determined by closeness to a window and by the direction from which the light comes into the window and the season. A northern exposure is low level light, while eastern, southern and western exposures offer a higher level of light. Window coverings, nearby buildings and trees will also determine light levels. My windows face southwest-ish. Right now, the sun hits the windows in one room about 9:30 AM. The windows in the other room get sun a little later because there is a patio wall blocking the light. The western exposure could be problematic in the summer because the sun will be hotter and be out for a longer period of time which could lead to scorched leaves. The small landscape trees planted in front of the building will moderate the strength of the western light in the summer by providing dappled light. If these shade trees weren't there, I would either move the plants in the window back a bit or use a sheer curtain to block the sun. I observed the windows for several months to learn this.

Basically, moisture is delivered to plants in two ways. The first is through the roots. Water is placed on the soil and moves through the soil to the roots which absorb it and move it to the leaves. If the soil gets too dry, the roots dry out. If the soil gets too wet, the roots suffocate. In either event, the roots become useless and the plant suffers. Some people give little sips of water to their plants every day. This practice doesn't work because the water never gets down to the roots. It is best to water deeply once or twice a week. Water deep enough so that it comes out the bottom of the pot. If there is water sitting in the saucer 30 minutes after watering, dump the excess so that the soil isn't super wet for a longer period of time. If the soil has separated from the pot and the water runs down between the soil and the pot instead of going into the soil, the soil is too dry. It can be rehydrated by putting the pot into a sink or bucket of water for a few minutes until the soil is damp again. You can determine if a plant needs water by sticking your finger into the soil. If it is wet or damp, no water is needed. One other tip about watering plants. If you have a water softener hooked up to your water system you should be aware that over time, the salt will build up in the soil. This can be avoided by watering with bottled water or rain water. If this is not feasible for you, you can repot with new soil as needed.

The second way a plant gets moisture is through the air (called humidity). Some house plants need more humidity than others. The amount of humidity in a home varies with the season. In the winter when the heating system is on, humidity drops, particularly in homes with forced hot air heat. There are several ways to increase humidity around plants. One is to put a humidifier in the room. Another is to mist the plant with tepid water. Mist the top and bottom of the leaves in the morning so that the leaves have time to dry before night. You can also sit the pots on trays of pebbles which have water added to not quite the top of the pebbles. The pots can be placed on top of the pebbles but, not in the water. Grouping plants together also helps with humidity.

The average houseplant likes a room temperature of @ 65- 70 degrees. Some exotic plants like a higher temperature, others like lower temperatures but, overall, 65-70 degrees works for most plants. Today, in checking my plants to see if they needed water, I found that the soil was damp (@5 days after watering) and, more importantly, cold. This is not good. I put cardboard underneath them and between them and the window and will monitor them daily so see if there is a change. If not, my next step will be to move them back from the windowsill and hope that enough light gets to them.

Houseplants will also need added fertilizer. Some windowsill gardeners prefer liquid fertilizer, some prefer granules which are added to water, and some prefer little

beads which are placed on top of the soil and gradually disperse over time as the plants are watered. The choice is up to the gardener. Remember that fertilizer is usually added to commercial soil mixes so do not add additional fertilizer until the fertilizer already in the soil mix is gone. Always read the fertilizer label and follow the instructions given. The last piece of advice is to not fertilize plants if they are showing signs of distress. More fertilizer only makes sick plants worse.

While windowsill gardens do sometimes have insect or disease problems, they are usually easily remedied. As I grow my windowsill plant collection, I will look for more specific help online. Penn State and other regional universities have excellent factsheets about houseplants. One book I have found helpful is the Complete Guide to Houseplants, Meredith Publishing, ISBN: 089721502-8. Our Garden Hotline is also available for help. I hope you try a few houseplants. They are an easy way to exercise your green thumb.

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