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Caring for House Plants in the Winter

If you have a house plant, or are overwintering outdoor plants inside your home, you may be wondering how to best care for your plants during the winter. While the exact care instructions will vary depending on the type of plant you have, there are several things you want to consider.

The first is light. Winter months not only bring cold temperatures but reduced daylight hours. This can sometimes cause trouble for houseplants that are not getting enough sunlight to properly photosynthesize. Plants with insufficient lighting are not able to efficiently produce chlorophyll. Consequently, they may lose their green coloring turning to a paler shade of green or even white. As the plants attempt to grow toward the light source, the stems can become elongated or "leggy." Leaves may drop prematurely and flower buds may not develop. Plants that should be variegated (have different colors or patterns on the leaves) may become solid in color.

You can also have too much light. Indoors, too much light is typically a concern for plants kept in a south or southwest facing window. Artificial lights that are kept too close to plants or left on for too long can also cause stress. Similar to how we get sunburns, plants can get injuries on their leaves from excess light. If your plants are beginning to display spots on the leaves that are pale or faded this could be symptoms of excessive light. If low light is a problem for your indoor growing, consider getting fluorescent or LED light fixtures. Lights that are marketed for plants should come with instructions that tell you how far away the light needs to be from the plant. Reading about the light requirements for your specific plant can also help you determine how long to leave the lights on. You may want to consider getting an outlet timer for your lamps.

Your plants should tell you if the light is not properly adjusted. If the plant leaves burn, move the lamp further away or shorten how long you leave the lamp on. If the stems stretch, move the lamp closer or leave it on longer.

Another important factor is temperature. Most houseplants prefer temperatures above 50 degrees F, but some require the temperature to be over 60- or 65-degrees F. While your house may be warm enough, if you have your plants on a windowsill, they may experience cold drafts that can harm them. Plants that are too cold may appear stunted, and foliage may be discolored or even turn mushy. Similarly, if a plant is placed near a heater or vent, dry hot air can dehydrate the plant and cause wilting or browning of leaves.

Lastly, consider humidity. Some plants prefer high humidity, and our dry winter air can be hard on them. For plants that need high humidity, consider setting up a humidifier or placing a shallow tray of water near the plant so that water will evaporate near it.

If you have questions on how to care for your particular house plant, reach out to our office more guidance.