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## HOUSE PLANTS THRIVE WITH A LITTLE CARE

The beauty of foliage, flowers, and form is not the only reason for growing plants indoors, says James A. Fizzell, University of Illinois Horticulturist in Cook County.

The challenge is to keep them thriving under household conditions and provide a bit of green for ourselves during the long winter season.

If a plant's color is poor, its leaves or flowers are distorted, or the plant tends to droop, something is wrong, says Fizzell.

Keep in mind that a plant must have air, water, food, and light. Soil used in house plants must be porous enough to allow drainage of excess water and to admit oxygen to the roots. Soil taken from the garden becomes hard when potted for houseplants. Most houseplants grow poorly in compacted soil. To avoid this condition, use a good soil mix, advises Fizzell. Use approximately equal amounts of garden loam, organic matter such as coarse peat moss, and coarse sand.

Wilting or partial wilting can be caused by lack of water, or by too much water. Check the moisture by pressing your finger about one-half inch into the soil. If the soil feels dry at this point, your plant needs water. If it feels wet, too much water in the root area may be the problem. Don't be afraid to knock the plant out of the pot and examine the roots to see if they are too dry, too wet, or diseased.

Perhaps you have noticed a white, flaky material on the soil surface or sides of the pot. The material consists of mineral salts that accumulate from the water. Flushing out these deposits from time to time may prevent salt injury to your plants. This can be done by thoroughly wetting the soil to dissolve these salts and then flushing them down through the soil and out through holes in the bottom of the pot.

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When fertilizing houseplants, Fizzell warns against using more than the recommended amount. Too much fertilizer may damage your plants.

If you discover you have overfertilized your plants, you can reduce possible injury by rinsing the soil with clear water. To do this, place the plant in a sink and water liberally three or four times at half-hour intervals, allowing the water to flush out the dissolved fertilizers and other accumulated salts. Rinsing the soil of most houseplants every six months is a good practice.

Finally, plants need light, says Fizzell. Some like direct sunlight; others require small amounts of light. Know your plant's light requirements and try to meet their needs by placing them close to or farther from light sources.

James A. Fizzell

