



# Happy Houseplant Class Handout



Before plant shopping, you'll want to make sure you want to know what kind of plants will thrive in your space. Here are some questions to consider...

- What direction does your light come from? Is it a window, skylight, grow lights, or a combo?
- What kind of care are you willing to give your plant? Are you really busy and want something less fussy or would you like to nurture something?
- What is your budget? There are many cool plants available in all price ranges
- Also, what plants are pet-friendly? There are many non-toxic plants that will be safe for your critters if they get the urge to nibble. They can still get a little queasy if they eat too much, so still be mindful of them. Botanical names are going to be very important when picking out pet-safe plants as there are many plants that have the same or similar common names - you want to make sure your information is correct. You will also want to make sure you're getting information from reputable sources. Websites like the ASPCA, college horticulture sites or current houseplant books work great - cross referencing your information is recommended too.

## **ACCLIMATING**

When you buy a new plant, it is always good to acclimate it away from your existing plants, for at least a week. I know this can be difficult when you have limited space and light, but it should be done. There could be a dormant pest hiding that can emerge later on and you don't want the rest of your plants to possibly be subjected. Your plant will also begin to acclimate to your growing conditions. Your plant may take up to two weeks before it shows any sort of growth or crankiness. If you see active growth then it is happy and we suggest keeping it in that spot, but if the plant begins to suffer then you may need to move the plant to a different location or check some other factors, such as pests or watering.

## **LIGHT**

- Lighting is one of the most important things to provide when owning houseplants.
- A good thing to remember is Light = Food. If you shove your plant in a dark corner or in an area with zero light, it will starve to death. No plants can grow in darkness, you will need to provide natural light from windows/skylights, use grow lights, or a combo of both. Something to remember is that these plants grow in very bright, warm climates outside, so it is best to try and mimic the conditions as best as possible.
- Knowing what direction light comes into your home will be very important in determining what plants will thrive in your space. Something to also keep in mind is if there is anything blocking the light coming into your home such as trees or other buildings.
- North facing will be the lowest light area in your home. Some plants may do okay or they may end up surviving but not thriving. In the window would be the best spot for plants.
- East facing will be between low-medium light. Direct sunlight from this direction will be okay for all plants since the light is not as intense as South or West facing. Again, getting plants as close to the window will be key for East light.

- South and West will be the most intense and high light. This bright indirect is the best light for most indoor plants. Bright indirect light refers to placing your plant out of the direct intense sun rays coming through the window but in the brightest spot possible. Some plants will not do well in direct light and will end up burning or bleaching out. Plants that grow in intense heat and sun, such as cacti and succulents, will do fine in direct light.
- If you do end up supplementing your natural light with grow lights, you will most likely need to keep your light on for a minimum of 8 hours. If you have no natural light source, you will need to provide at least 12 to 16 hours and be sure to try and position the light above the plant. You may need to tweak the distance a bit to make sure you don't end up burning your plant. Purchasing energy efficient bulbs would be wise if you plan on having them for long periods of time.
- Three light tips to remember...
  1. Rotate (spin) your plants every couple of weeks to make sure you are getting even growth. Unless you only want growth to cascade or go one way.
  2. Make sure you are cleaning/wiping your leaves at least every month. This will help the plant to absorb more light, therefore receive more food.
  3. Don't move your plants in and out of light. If you have a plant in a spot and it is doing well, leave it. If you have a plant that is not doing well in a certain spot, move it but do not swap it with another plant that is happy. Find a new location where it may thrive.

## **WATERING**

- Watering can be challenging at first, but once you get into a groove and a good schedule it will get easier.
- First thing you want to do is check the moisture of the soil before watering. Most plants like to dry out an inch or more before watering again, especially if it's in a lower light area.
- Checking weekly is a good schedule to commit to - not necessarily watering every week, but checking the soil moisture. A good way to check is to use your fingers and test the soil. This will also get you used to how much to water. I'm not a big fan of moisture meters due to not really knowing first-hand what the moisture is like unless you have a really deep pot and you have short fingers. You could also use a non-treated chopstick to stick down into the soil and test - the chopstick will absorb the moisture where it's plunged.
- When it is time to water, it is good to water thoroughly. Watering thoroughly is when you completely saturate the soil and see the water come out from the drainage holes at the bottom.
- If the water immediately runs straight through the pot, the soil has completely dried out and has become soil stressed. To remedy this, it is good to grab a saucer or dish and put your plant in. Then top water, allowing the water to collect in the dish and leaving it until the soil has reconstituted and is saturated. Hopefully the next time you remember to water the soil it will be in better shape so you're not stressing the plant out as much.
- A great way to get on a good watering schedule is to set yourself a reminder on your phone or write it on your calendar to check your plants weekly.
- There are few different signs that plants will show you when they are thirsty...
  - Curling of the leaves inward, change in foliage color (usually a really drab color of green), wrinkling in the leaves, and wilting. Wilting can also mean early signs of root rot with overwatering, another reason why it's important to check the soil before watering.

- Humidity is something not all plants require, but a lot of foliage plants do prefer - more than your home naturally produces. A good way to increase humidity is to group plants together. Plants have what are called stomata in their leaves, which act like pores (like our skin) and release water vapor out, kinda like plant sweat. The more plants are together, the more vapor is released in the same area, creating humidity. Another way is to use a saucer or dish with rocks, or stones at the base and filling it almost to the top with water. Do not fill it so the plant is sitting in water, but enough so when the water evaporates around the plant, it will do so up and around the pot. The best way to increase humidity is to use a humidifier. This can be a chore and added expense for some, but it helps to target certain areas and your humidity-loving plants like calatheas, ferns, orchids would love it.
- Misting plants can be challenging since you would have to do so heavily every day for it to make a difference and if you don't have good airflow and the leaves stay wet for long periods of time, they can eventually rot the leaves and introduce diseases, fungi, and pests.
- Plants that are close to fireplaces, air conditioners, heat vents, are hanging or sitting higher up will all dry out faster - something to keep in mind

## **AERATING**

Aerating your plant's soil is not talked about very much, but it is important to do. Roots require oxygen to get to the roots and since we don't have lovely earth worms in our houseplant soil creating oxygen pathways to the roots, it is up to us to help with that. About once a month, before watering, you can squeeze your grow pot to break up some of the soil or if it is planted in a more decorative pot, you can use your handy chopstick again and poke some holes through the soil a few times. If you don't aerate your soil, it can become compacted and smother your roots.

## **TEMPERATURE**

Indoor plants typically have a growing zone of 10 or higher. This means that they grow in climates like Hawaii, Florida, South America, etc., so growing in temperatures between 65F to 75F is ideal. Some plants thrive in the summer months here in the PNW, but when the temps start to drop below 55F at night it is time to bring the plants inside.

## **AIR FLOW**

Air flow is an important component that also isn't address much when it comes to houseplants. In the wild, plants are subjected to breeze and wind - this helps dry out foliage, strengthen vines/stalks and mitigate pests. If you have a ceiling fan moving air where your plants are, that's great! A small stationary or oscillating fan would also work. Make sure you are not pointing the fan directly on the leaves, like they are in a hurricane, but directing the air creating a gentle breeze in the leaves.

## **REPOTTING**

The best time to repot your indoor plant is in the spring, but sometimes that just doesn't happen. I don't recommend doing it in the winter, since most plants aren't actively growing and some can go into dormancy. When you do repot, you will want to make sure that you don't go over two sizes bigger than the original grow pot. You also want to make sure that you're using the right soil for your plant. Typically a quality potting mix is good for your foliage plants, but you'll want to make sure you're using succulent/cactus mix for your succulent and cacti. Sometimes you can mix a little of the

succulent mix into regular potting soil to increase the drainage a little bit for certain plants, or if your decorative pot has limited drainage. If you are using a decorative cache pot, we do recommend you keep your plant in its grow pot so it can properly drain. When you plant in a pot with no drainage, you run the risk of overwatering and rotting your plant. If your heart is set on planting in a pot with no drainage, then using some activated charcoal at the bottom is best - it will absorb extra moisture and it inhibits the growth of bacteria. We don't recommend using rock since it can harbor bacteria and it won't absorb extra water.

## **FERTILIZING**

Fertilizing is recommended between the growing months of April to September when the light is at its highest here in the PNW. We like to use natural fertilizers, such as liquid Espoma fertilizers. They come in a liquid concentrate that you dilute at the recommended dosage - diluting properly is important. Using a more concentrated fertilizer will not help your plant grow more! If you use too much, you can actually burn your plant and contribute to salt buildup in the soil, hindering your plant from absorbing water properly. If you are seeing active growth on your plant during the peak months of April to September, then fertilizing once a month is a good regime. If you see active growth on plants during the winter months or if you supplement with grow lights, then you can fertilize during this time - it is recommended you dilute the fertilizer even further, to a lower dose. Remember that light = food. Fertilizer is the vitamins and minerals your plant needs. Be sure to use the correct fertilizer on the type of plant you are growing - you typically will see three different general fertilizers for indoor plants, indoor, cactus, and one for flowers. (N) Nitrogen is for leaf growth, (P) Phosphorus is for blooms and roots, (K) Potassium helps with overall growth and with moving water and nutrients within the plant.