

## **Post Rock Answers**

**By Cassie Thiessen October 18, 2024**

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### **Houseplant Care**

Houseplants aren't just for decoration, they have been proven to clean the air in our homes and even make us happy and healthier. As winter approaches it's nice to have plants inside our homes to remind us of nature. Caring for houseplants can boost your mental health and can help combat the winter blues when it's harder to spend time outdoors. Here are some care tips and easy ways to help your plants thrive:

When you first purchase a plant from a greenhouse or flower shop it will need to be acclimated to the conditions of your home, and the same is true when you bring plants in from outside. In the greenhouse the plants were growing in their ideal environment, but our home conditions aren't always best for plants. Don't be discouraged if your new plant initially drops a few leaves as this is normal and just a way for the plant to cope with the stress of moving to its new home.

Improper watering is the number one reason I see houseplants killed or injured. Watering seems like a simple concept, but it can be tricky because you can't water on a schedule. There is no general rule to watering plants - it depends on the size of plant, pot, light, temperature, humidity and other conditions. These factors influence the speed with which the soil dries out. Soil kept either too wet or too dry causes the plant roots to die. The easiest method to determine if your plants need water is to stick your finger into the soil, if it feels dry about two inches down, you will need to water. You have to pay attention to your plants and learn their needs. You can often tell if the plant needs watered by the color and feel of the soil. When the soil surface dries, it becomes lighter in color. Under drier conditions the soil might begin to crack and pull away from the sides of the pot. You can also learn the weight of your plant and when it begins to feel light when lifted, you know it could use a drink.

When watering your plants, it's best to use a watering can with a small spout and keep water off the foliage. Each time, wet the entire soil mass, not just the top inch. Make sure your plant is in a pot that has drainage holes, as houseplants should always have good drainage to keep the roots healthy. Make sure you are watering until it drains through the holes in the bottom of the pot. Discard water that remains in the saucer a half hour after watering.

Improper light intensity is the second reason houseplants don't thrive in our homes. The amount of light necessary for good growth varies with different types of plants. If you have flowering plants they like moderately bright light. A south, east or west window will be best. Once your plants start to produce flowers the bright light will actually harm the flowers, move them out of direct light and into a cooler location. You can also use artificial lighting if you don't have a bright window location. If you have foliage plants, they are divided into different light needs such as low-light, moderate-light, and bright-light areas. Gradually move your plants within your home to find the best area. An abrupt move from low-light to bright-light may be damaging for plants. You may also want to rotate your plant every few weeks to avoid getting a one-sided shape.

The temperature and humidity in our homes are another element that houseplants will need to adjust to. Flowering potted plants do best in temperatures of 65 to 75 degrees, and cooler temperatures at night to extend the blooms. Foliage plants are more tolerant of high temperatures, but they thrive at 65 to 70 degrees. In the winter windows may be too cold. The air is often very dry in our homes in the winter. A humidifier can help plant growth, as a relative humidity between 40 to 60 percent is best for most plants.

Houseplants will do best if put on a fertilizer schedule. Fertilizing once a month is adequate with a balanced fertilizer. Don't fertilize in the winter because the plants aren't actively growing at this time. This means they will also need less water in the winter when growth is slowed. Houseplants will rarely have insect or disease issues. If you do find bugs on your plants the most common are spider mites, scales, fungus gnats, and mealy bugs. Bring a sample into your local extension office for identification and help with control measures.

This winter try growing some houseplants to brighten up the cold months. Most are easy, low maintenance, and will give you joy and color in your home or office. If you have any questions about houseplant care contact your local extension office.

*Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at [cathiessen@ksu.edu](mailto:cthiessen@ksu.edu) or by calling Beloit (785-738-3597).*