

Indoor Potted Plant Care

If you are lucky to have received potted blooming plants for a special occasion or you like to treat yourself with these beauties, keeping indoor blooming plants looking their best is not very difficult. Keeping indoor plants looking their best, even in the short, sometimes-bleak days of winter requires providing the correct amounts of light, temperature, humidity, water and fertilizer.

Modern heating and air conditioning system are really hard on indoor plants, especially those that bloom throughout the winter. Fall and winter blooming plants are usually grown in ideal conditions in greenhouses, and have been forced to bloom for special occasions. Knowing these facts may suggest that unless one has a greenhouse, keeping indoor plants blooming is difficult. Not at all, just create greenhouse like conditions in your house.

Light. Give plants strong, bright light for good color development, but avoid too much direct sunlight, especially through glass. The rays of sun through glass are magnified, and can burn the plant's tender foliage, as well as dry out the soil. Since the days are short in the winter, usually 6 hours or less, plants which are accustomed to many hours, usually 8 hours or more, of bright light in the greenhouse, often struggle to get enough light to bloom in our homes. Either place your plant in a south-facing window out of the direct sun or add some artificial lighting. Usually two hours prior to sunrise and an additional two hours after sunset, using grow bulbs made especially for this purpose (available at hardware stores, some nurseries or gardening catalogs) can keep plants blooming throughout the short days of winter. Artificial lights do not have to be a large bank of lights; just a couple of bulbs two to three feet away pointed at the plants will work just fine. You can also arrange these lights in an artistic and pleasant way so they do not distract from the attractiveness of your blooming plant.

Temperature. Plants near glass are also affected by the temperatures outdoors. In cold weather, draw the curtains or tape a piece of newspaper to the glass for insulation. It is a good idea to keep your plants at least a foot from the glass. Keeping the temperature in the room where your plants are on the comfortable-to-cool side (about 68 degrees F in the daytime and a little cooler at night) will also keep your plants blooming longer and brighter. Temperatures can get warmer than 68 degrees F during the day; (e.g. mid-seventies) but cool temperatures at night (mid-sixties) are critical to longer lasting flower displays.

Humidity. High humidity can be provided by using saucers filled with gravel and water, this will offset the drying effects of winter heating and summer air conditioning. The best way to use these saucers filled with gravel and water is to place them under your plants. The plant container should sit on the gravel, but not in the water.

Watering. Providing water for houseplants is the trickiest part of all. Most people overdo it. You can check the moisture in the plant's soil by sticking a pencil several inches into the soil, then pulling it back out. If the pencil has soil stuck to it, the soil is moist enough. A more reliable way is to use a moisture meter. These are inexpensive and available at your nursery. Moisture meters are designed to measure the moisture level in the soil on a scale of 1 to 9. Most of these meters have a chart, which gives the proper moisture level for a whole range of indoor plants. When watering your plants thoroughly water them until water eventually runs out the bottom. Do this every time you water. By watering thoroughly, you do three important things. First, water completely wets the soil ball, so all the roots get a drink. Second, water leaches out salts, abundant in our Valley water supply, that otherwise if allowed to build-up in the pot, will damage the roots and cause the leaves to turn brown. Third, good drainage prevents plant death from water-logged soil.

Fertilizer. Feed your plants every time you water by using a half-strength fertilizer. Solution recommended for blooming plants such as Carl Pool BR-61 with magic green, or Peter's Indoor Plant Food are ideal.

By following these proper light, temperature, humidity, watering and fertilizing principles you will keep you beautiful indoor plants healthy and blooming brightly for a long time. If you should happen to find insects or diseases on your indoor plants, contact your nursery or garden center for proper control.

(Information source: Cecile Waugh of Waugh's Nursery, McAllen, TX)
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