

## How to Care for Your Indoor and Tropical Plants...



Brendan has kindly put together the following guide to help understand some of the terminology used around house plants and how to care for them throughout the year...

### General Rules for Indoor or Tropical Plants:

Grow in warm spaces 15-25c away from direct hot sun (south/west facing windows, radiators, stoves etc.) Increased humidity is beneficial, pebble trays, spraying etc.

Refresh tired looking plants by annual spring repotting or compost changing.  
Always pot on to the next size pot as too much wet compost in a big pot will rot roots

Indirect light refers to east or north facing windows or away from south and west windows i.e where you have plants near a south/west facing window, place them further into the room. Good light refers to constant bright light.

Most need regular complete watering & feeding (preferably lukewarm rainwater as tap water is often alkaline) weekly or fortnightly from March to October, making sure the soil is mostly dry between waterings and the roots are never sitting in water for long periods (a short soak of up to 30 mins or so is ok if the plant is extremely dry).

Check plants and water on the same day each week to avoid over/under watering.

Check plants in decorative pots are dry or not too wet by lifting up and looking inside.

Reduce amount of water through autumn and winter (October – March). During these months you don't generally need to feed houseplants and you should avoid drafts and temperatures below 15°C. Also note that the cooler the temperature, the less water is needed. Similarly if the heating is on, more watering may be required, as the air will be very dry.

Monthly showers especially in winter are beneficial and can help remove dust ...leaves are essentially solar panels which cannot produce adequate energy when dusty or dirty. Where there is stubborn dirt or dust you may want to clean these with a damp cloth or some kitchen towel.

## A Plant by Plant Guide:

Below is list of some more specific care for individual plant varieties:

**Adiantum fragrans (maidenhair fern):** Needs indirect light & good humidity. Likes some fresh air in summer. Perfect for moist north/east facing bathrooms (avoid dry heat & cold drafts).

**Aloe Vera (see cacti & succulents):** all aloe's are extremely drought tolerant. Best grown in small terracotta pots that dry out quickly and only watered fortnightly or monthly in summer..keep completely dry in winter...always grow in full sun and provide as much fresh air as is possible...rainfall outside is fine if the pot is not overly full with wet compost....repot into a soil/grit mix of 50/50% and only when necessary...this plant prefers to be severely potbound so it has extreme drainage.

**Alocasia (elephants ear, buddha's hand):** A south Asian vegetable tuber, can grow very large with huge leaves so loves plenty of full light, water & feed and a rich compost and growing space from march to October. Will grow outside in summer in sheltered warm place, or perfect for a warm conservatory. Can be stored overwinter as a dry tuber.

**Anthurium (flamingo flower):** Needs warm humid spaces with good light to thrive. Brown leaves & lack of flowering indicates too cool, dry or shady. Choose a rich compost or feed well, place in a warm space with good light on a pebble tray & spray regularly.

**Asparagus Fern (setaceus; climber) (densifolius; trailing);**  
More tolerant than most indoor ferns, prefers it slightly cooler & indirect light. Will tolerate warm rooms if watered regularly & kept out of strong sunlight. Drops leaves if too dry but will recover easily with regular watering & feeding. Great for hanging pots in stairwells or from high ceilings/shelves or on indoor trellis as can easily climb/trail 5ft long or more.

**Aspidistra (cast iron plant);** needs indirect light (no direct sunlight) tolerates drafts, good for hallways & north facing windows & happy in cool rooms.

**Begonia Rex hybrids & maculata (polkadot);** Easy & tolerates strong light but better kept out of or back from south facing windows. Always let dry completely before rewatering. In winter I only ever water when the leaves droop. Tends to loose lots of leaves in winter, but recovers in spring. Loves fresh air in summer.

**Calathea, Ctenanthe (prayer plant);** the latter is more tolerant all round. Tap water browns leaves so must have lukewarm rain water only, keep a little moister than other plants. Will tolerate short dry periods in summer.....extended drying out in winter in

heated rooms will quickly result in brown crispy leaves. Tolerates quite a bit of shade, but needs good indirect cool light to thrive. Spray often & refresh compost annually.

**Cacti (also see Succulents):** Require ideally cool (7-12c) completely dry winters, and warm summers march to Oct with regular watering every 7-28 days, full sun and lots of fresh air

**Ceropegia woodii (string of hearts...also see succulents):** A trailing succulent from south Africa. Tolerates a wide range of light conditions, in low light the leaves get bigger. As with all succulents let compost dry completely between waterings and keep mostly dry in winter.

**Chlorophytum (spider plant):** Tolerant of a wide range of conditions, prefers temperatures of 15-21c and regular watering/feeding in summer with good light, but will tolerate lower light and can easily survive short periods of freezing in winter if kept completely dry. I have used it outside as bedding and it survived mild winters in a dry covered area. Rejuvenate old plants by cutting back and removing all old compost in spring and repot into fresh compost.

**Crassula - Succulents (below):**

**Cycas revoluta (sago palm):** Is not related at all to palms, Tolerant of a wide range of conditions, but better kept on the dry side (water well every 7-14 days) and out of hot sunny windows indoors. Water & feed in the similar way to **cacti or succulents** at half strength. Appreciates fresh air in summer.

**Dracena (dragon tree):** water similarly to **cacti & succulents** but avoid really hot sunny windows indoors. Tolerant of semishade, better in good light. Tolerant of erratic watering as long as the compost dries out between waterings. Appreciates fresh air in summer. Can get very tall, reduce by cutting the stem which will sprout new shoots. Cuttings will sprout roots in water, best done in early spring.

**Dionaea muscipula (Venus Flytrap):** Must have rain or distilled water & be kept moist but not wet. Avoid any kind of fertilizer or compost with added nutrients. Need warmth & really good light, 6 hours min in summer. Closing the traps requires energy so avoid doing it by hand unless you give them insects to boost nutrients...one or two flies/mealworms a week is enough. Place dead insects/worms in the trap to close it, then gently stimulate outside the closed trap between thumb & forefinger to close it tightly to start enzyme production & dissolve the insects.

**Epipremnum (pothos, Devil's Ivy):** Easily grown in a wide range of conditions. Best in indirect light or East/North facing windows. Water regularly & watch they dont get too dry in winter. Can tolerate long periods of down to 8c when fairly dry but best kept above 15c. Propagates easily in water. Similar to **Scindaptus pictus**.

## **Echeveria - see Cacti & Succulents**

**Fatsia Japonica (False castor oil plant, Japanese Aralia):** Commonly grown as an evergreen garden plant, can be grown indoors. Prefers cooler conditions inside & semishade. Can get quite large, so good for large hallways etc.

**Ficus benjamina, (Fig tree):** needs indirect light or semi shade & warm stable temperatures as dramatic temperature fluctuations or drafts will cause severe leaf drop. Moving most ficus generally causes leaf drop from which they usually recover once stabilised. As it is essentially a large tree, leaf drop is also normal in late autumn, which normally recovers in spring/summer.

Avoid placing between doors and heat sources & in hot sunny windows or dark spaces. Water thoroughly and let the top 1-2 inches dry out before rewatering.

**Ficus binnendijkli 'Alli'** is more tolerant than most ficus but can still lose leaves when moved.

**Ficus Elastica robusta (rubber plant):** Treat as other figs, provide good light and prune tips annually to promote bushiness or you will end up with a tall stick as this plant wants to grow into a huge tree. Tolerant of cooler temperatures than other figs, but should be kept above 15c in winter.

**Hedera Helix (Ivy):** Needs cooler conditions indoors away from hot sun and heat sources. Keep moist but not wet and provide plenty of fresh air where possible. Will tolerate quite low light conditions as long as its not too warm.

**Kalanchoe (also see Cacti & Succulents):** Needs very good light, prefer morning or late afternoon light, but can tolerate full sun when outdoors for the summer...must have plenty of fresh air whenever possible and always let dry out completely between waterings. Keep completely dry and cold 10c in winter to encourage reflowering

**Medinilla Magnifica (rose grape):** An indonesian epiphyte growing on trees (similarly to orchids & ferns) requires constantly moist but not wet compost...allow the top 2 inches to dry out between waterings. Feed at half strength as for orchids & provide good light away from hot sunlight. Keep at temperatures above 18c with a temperature drop to 10c for two months in winter to induce reflowering....can grow up to 3m tall.

**Nepenthes (pitcher plant):** Unlike the venus flytrap, this plant grows in trees (epiphyte) so needs to be kept constantly moist but not wet or saturated with lukewarm rain or distilled water. Avoid tap water! Feed with mealworms or small insects and try not to over do the bug feed or your plant may be become overwhelmed 2-3 weekly is plenty. Keep plant in full light above 18c. Prefers temperate range of up to 36c daily with nightly drop to above 10c...for this reason

warm rooms where the temperature plummets at night are perfect, especially in windows where the air will chill after dark. Avoid repotting into composts with added nutrients/fertilizers.

**Nephrolepis Exaltata (boston fern):** Keep the compost moist (but not waterlogged) at all times, this can be cut back a little in winter, and place in a bright spot away from direct sunlight. These ferns love a humid atmosphere, so mist the leaves regularly with water and/or place the pot on pebbles in a tray filled with water.

**Nolina Recurvata (elephant's foot or ponytail palm):** not related to palms at all. Needs full sunlight or very bright light indoors, water well regularly making sure the compost dries completely between as for **Cacti & succulents**. Tolerates occasional low temperatures to 0c, also tolerates very warm conditions indoors but not close proximity to heat sources. Wont actually produce new growth at temperatures below 18-20c .

**Pilea:** Tolerant of a wide range of conditions as long as its not sitting in cold wet compost especially in winter.....Naturally prefers moist compost which dries somewhat between waterings....this plant has succulent leaves so stores water and therefore can withstand periods of drought....so watering is really the key to disaster or success....keep warm in good light away from hot dry conditions.

**Phalaenopsis (butterfly orchid):** prefers bright conditions with warm days and cooler nights and relatively high humidity. Will grow happily in normal rooms as long as they are not too hot and dry...above kitchen sinks and bathrooms are usually best..water by soaking whole pot submerged in warm water for up to 20 mins of so weekly, drain before replacing in growing spot. Feed at half strength as for succulents and epiphytes, and place where night temperatures drop to 5-10c to encourage reflowering....trim back if needed but dont completely remove flower stems as they will often reflower for up to 6 months at a time.

**Philadendron:** Most philadendrons tend to be tolerant of both under and overwatering as long as its not cold and wet together or hot and dry for too long. The key to sucess is a normal temperature range of 15 -21c, with good light away from hot sun and regular watering with dryish periods between. Usually propagates easily in water.

**Phlebodium Aureum (blue fern):** prefers to be constantly moist but not wet, however its best to let it dry out somewhat between waterings to avoid overwatering, especially in decorative pots where one cannot see how much water is actually in there. Lift the whole plant up and if the bottom looks wet, then leave it another few days before watering with lukewarm rainwater. Keep in good light away from hot sun at a temperature range of 14-24c ideally.

**Platycerium (stags horn fern):** prefers good light away from hot sunlight with good humidity as it naturally grows in damp tropical woodlands on trees. Therefore good in bathrooms or above kitchen sinks in east/north or west facing windows. Needs to dry out between waterings which is not a problem in the kokedama (moss ball things) Avoid using tap water. And feed monthly from March to October. Keep above 15c in winter, though can tolerate short periods lower than this.

**Rhipsalis (also see Cacti & succulents):** An easy tropical forest cacti which grows as an epiphyte on trees, Requires indirect light and can tolerate shade and cool conditions. Water well in summer making sure it dries out between and keep relatively dry in winter

**Saintpaulia (african violet):** needs good indirect light away from hot sun which will damage its delicate leaves. Regular watering/feeding in summer and kept relatively dry and cool 12-18c in winter....cooler periods 10 -18c with high humidity will induce reflowering better than hot dry conditions. I put mine outside in a covered area where they get some morning sunlight in summer and the nights are cooler which usually brings them back into flower. Hot dry conditions often results in whitefly attacks, which can be resolved by spraying with water, although avoid getting leaves wet regularly.

**Sanseveria (snake plant...also see Succulents):** Now reclassified as Dracena, this succulent is very drought tolerant. Regular weekly or fortnightly watering is appreciated from April to Sept and kept almost completely dry in winter is best. As for all succulents feed at half strength in summer and will grow happily in both strong sunshine and half shade. Grows up to 3 foot tall eventually. And will flower in a warm sunny position.

**Schefflera (umbrella tree):** Requires a warm room Above 15c with indirect light away from hot sunshine. Water regularly letting compost get quite dry between, and keep dryer in winter. Overwatering and cold temperatures or drafts will result in leaf drop, which they usually recover from and resprout when proper care is provided. Can get very tall and leggy, cut back to anything above a few inches and they will resprout....pinch out the tips to encourage bushiness.....cuttings often root easily in water.

**Senecio Herrianus (string of tears) & Senecio rowleanus (String of pearls/beads also see Succulents):** Short lived succulents (up to 5 yrs or so) prefers indirect light or morning sun, and a little more moisture than most succulents, but still needs to dry out mostly between waterings. Feed at half strength from march to October and keep mostly dry in winter. Can go outside in summer but avoid hot afternoon sun. Repot into a topsoil/compost/grit mix which is more water retentive than Cactus compost.

**Scindaptus pictus (satin pothos):** requires similar care as philodendron or Epipremnum, good light away from hot afternoon sun, Normal temp range of 15-

24c. Regular water and feeding march to October and less water in winter. Cut back in spring if necessary to encourage bushiness. Cuttings root easily in water.

**Schlumbergia (Christmas cactus also see cacti & succulents):** An easy tropical forest cacti, which requires drying out between waterings and indirect good light and normal room temperatures. Keeping it cold 10c and dry from September onwards will encourage good flowering around nov/Dec.....bring the plant into a warm room as soon as flower buds appear and don't move again it as this will cause flowers to drop. If possible place the whole plant outside in summer in a sheltered shady spot away from slugs as fresh air is very beneficial.

**Spathiphyllum (Arum/Peace lily):** Requires good light to flower and warm temperatures. Feed regularly in summer and let dry out a little between waterings. Avoid tap water if possible as the salts and lime present will brown the leaves. Refresh compost annually to reinvigorate. Will tolerate lower light but may not flower as often.

**Stephanotis:** Requires good light indoors and extra humidity so spray regularly. Avoid moving the plant when in flower or it will drop flowers, water and feed regularly from march to Sept and keep cool on less water in winter. Will climb up a long way indoors but is easily cut back...prefers a soil based compost for repotting into.

**Streptocarpus (cape primrose):** Prefers regular watering with dry periods between in summer and high humidity....for this reason I find it performs better outside in a bright sheltered sunless spot under cover in hot summers, where it is out of the rain but enjoys the fresh moist air. Keep relatively dry and cool 10-14c in winter.

**Succulents:** As a rule they are all very drought tolerant and prefer full sun. Bright sunny windows indoors are preferred, some shade will be tolerated but only when cool and dry except for **Ceropegia (string of hearts)** which can actually grow happily in shade. NB; hot sunny windows can be overly hot & dry even for succulents. Open windows on hot days helps to cool air and provide relief. All **Echeverias and Crassulas** need full sun or very good light on windowsills. Regular summer watering is necessary, weekly in hot dry weather or fortnightly in cooler wetter weather is perfect (avoid over feeding!...half strength monthly is enough) and plenty of fresh air from April to October is optimal for health, Succulents open their pores at night to absorb condensation so place plants outside if possible unless its a completely wet summer they will be very happy, regular rainfall is very beneficial and they can cope with long dry hot periods also. Otherwise leave by open windows and your plant will be much happier than left in a hot dry environment indoors all year round. Many succulents turn lovely colours when exposed to wind and sun as natural sunblocks. Ideally keep cool at 10-15c and completely dry in winter...if not possible avoid watering more than once a month in warm rooms ...winter watering especially in shade produces leggy weak growth.

When this happens cut back plants severely in spring and provide fresh air to regenerate. Succulents all root easily from cuttings left in fairly dry conditions initially for a few weeks...but you must have lots of patience...they are never in a hurry to do anything.

**Syngonium (arrow head):** is a twining climber that grows up to 20m high in latin American jungles and is easily grown in average house conditions....give bright light avoiding hot sun, regular watering/feeding in summer and keep somewhat dryish in winter in a temperature range of 15 – 24c and this plant will grow away happily climbing up or trailing down.

**Tradescantia (wandering dew):** these plants come in a wide range and tolerate different conditions, however as a general rule, water regularly letting them dry out between, provide good light with morning or late afternoon sun, avoiding the hottest part of the day. Feed regularly in spring and summer and keep cooler and drier in winter....All tradescantia's root easily in water. Cut whole plant back severely in spring and repot/refresh when severely rootbound as they tend to get bare at the top...this will refresh with new growth.....after 2-3 yrs take lots of cuttings and start a new plant discarding the old one.

**Yucca:** A very drought tolerant tree. provide very good light, regular spring/summer watering & feeding, fresh air and keep mostly dry and cool if possible in winter. If not possible, water monthly from October to March.

**Zamioculcas Zamifolia:** Very drought tolerant tuberous plant from South Africa which tolerates shade but grows better with good light. Keep almost competely dry in winter and be careful not to over water in spring/summer.....needs a warm room.