

# Common Houseplant Problems

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Living plants of various kinds are a popular addition to the decor of many homes, restaurants, and other business places. Green and flowering plants serve as accents and also help soften hard architectural lines and wall surfaces. They improve quality of living.

Although less harsh in many respects, the average indoor environment presents some unique problems for normal plant growth. Light intensities in homes tend to be low, especially during fall and winter. Low light results in small leaves, pale color, long spindly stems and flower failure. Lowered atmosphere humidity from the heating of homes cause rapid loss of moisture from plant surfaces, the soil surface and the outside surface of porous clay pots.



Photo by UNL Extension Associate Sorri Cochran

A plant which has outgrown its pot quickly exhausts the water present in the soil.

There are a number of other stress-inducing factors that may cause problems. Many people over water their houseplants by maintaining the soil constantly wet. This can cause root rots that impair ability to replace moisture loss. A plant may outgrow the pot so that its top is out of balance with the amount of soil in which the plant is growing. Such plants quickly exhaust the supply of water present in the soil and must be watered more frequently. Constant watering sometimes compacts the soil and reduces air space, which deprives the roots of adequate oxygen. This can reduce root development and plant growth. The soil may become "channeled" so that water drains too rapidly and fails to thoroughly wet all of the soil in the container.

Determining the cause of some houseplant problems may be difficult and require skilled laboratory diagnostic procedures. Other problems are relatively simple to diagnose. Described below are some of the more common disorders and diseases, their possible causes and suggested corrective measures.

Leaf spots are quite variable in appearance, depending upon the cause. Spots caused by injury from direct sunlight on shade requiring

plants usually are large with regular margins. Each spot may involve the entire portion of the exposed leaf. The injured area appears bleached, gradually turning tan to brown, and eventually collapsing.

Leaf spots resulting from chemical injury or exposure to temperature change due to droplets of cold water usually are smaller. They generally are yellowish at first with regular margins conforming with the shape and size of the drops of chemical solution or water that caused the injury.

A number of leaf spot diseases are caused by fungi and bacteria. Symptoms usually are small, water soaked spots, gradually enlarging and turning brown. There also may be considerable yellowing around the margins of the spots. These diseases rarely develop under the dry atmospheric conditions prevalent in most houses. They are most common on plants recently brought into the state from southern propagating areas.

Occasionally, leaf spots develop in the vicinity of feeding injury caused by sap-sucking insects, such as aphids, scale and mealybug. Plant surfaces in



Photos by Clemson University

Leaf spot caused by cold water.



Leaf spot caused by bacteria

the vicinity of these insects often are covered by a glistening, sticky honeydew.

To control leaf spot you can remove and destroy affected leaves, avoid sprinkling water on the foliage and provide adequate air circulation. If insects are involved, correctly identify the pest causing the problem. Control sap-sucking insects by washing leaves, petioles and stems with a damp cloth or treating with a commercially-prepared pyrethrin spray for house plants. Rubbing alcohol also may be applied to insects such as mealybugs with cotton swabs. Systemic insecticides also will control sucking insects.

Yellowing leaves are often caused by nutrient deficiency, especially nitrogen, but also may occur as a result of a sudden reduction of light intensity. Dieffenbachia, dracena and rubber plant are especially susceptible, as are larger pot-bound specimens of other plants. Applications of nitrogen fertilizer may reverse the devel-

opment of this condition when yellowing has just started. Be cautious about fertilizing plants during the winter months. Plants growing under low light intensities are easily injured by over-fertilization. Older leaves are slower to respond, as are leaves in which yellowing is advanced.

Leaves and succulent shoots become limp or wilted, usually recovering when water is supplied. This may be evidence of water shortage or over-abundance of water followed by the development of root rot. Over-fertilization also can cause wilting. To control wilting, check drainage, check for root rot, check for conditions promoting unusually rapid loss of water or alter watering schedule.

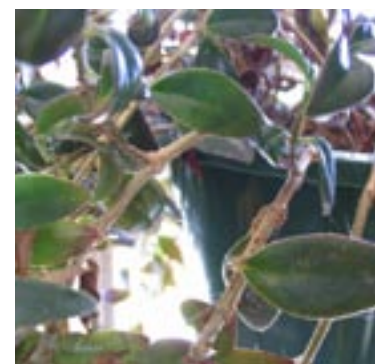


Photo by UNL Extension Assistant Vicki Jedlicka

Sap-sucking insects such as scales can leave a sticky honeydew on plant surfaces.

## Gifts For The Gardener

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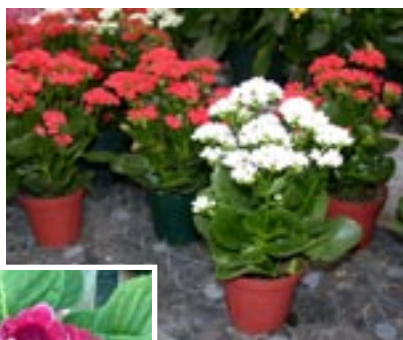
Need an original or unique gift idea? Here are some gift suggestions for the gardener in the family or someone who just appreciates the outdoors.

Holiday plants are always a welcome gift to any home. They add color and holiday accents to interior surroundings. The traditional red poinsettias are popular, as are the newer flower colors of pink, white and yellow. Other possibilities are Christmas cactus, red gloxinia and kalanchoe.

The outdoor gardener might like to receive a certain tool to make the job of spring gardening easier. Soil working tools like rakes, hoes and spades may be difficult to wrap and still be a surprise, but they are always welcome. Pruning tools, like hand shears and small saws, are easier to wrap and may be needed later this winter.

A home weather station that includes a minimum-maximum thermometer, a rain gauge and a weather log is a good gift.

Do not overlook the possibility of a gardening magazine



Kalanchoe



Gloxinia

or plant book as a gift. Many larger book stores have well stocked sections on these and related topics. Garden centers and nurseries also offer a variety of titles on individual plants as well as cultural practices. Someone with a new home might like a book on plant selection and landscaping, while people with a well established garden and landscape might better use information on maintenance and pruning practices.



Minimum-Maximum thermometers show current temperature and the highest and lowest temperature since reset.

Children love to garden and be outside too. Child size tools and gloves are available for them to use. Other items to consider are children's gardening books, flower press, worm composting bin, stepping

stone kit and seeds of their favorite vegetables or flowers to plant in the garden just for them.

If you have a non-gardening friend or relative you want to introduce to gardening, consider a total package with plant, container and growing media, along with a book on plant care.

There are many gift ideas for people who like to spend their time at the many state parks in the area. To make their adventure more enjoyable consider giving them a 2006 state park car pass to get into the park, a compass and identification books on wild flowers, birds, insects, butterflies, trees, tracks or mammals. Other useful items would include binoculars to look for things far away, pocket magnifier to see small things close up, sports or explorer's watch, canteen for water, disposable camera, hiking boots, sun screen and insect repellent.

Gifts for people who appreciate the outdoors in their own back yard might like bird feeders with birdseed or a compost bin. Other gifts might be a bird bath, bird or bat house, butterfly raise/release kit, outdoor thermometer, rain gauge, wild flower or native grass seed.

Some people may just wish to sit back, relax and enjoy the outdoors. Gifts for them may include a porch swing, garden bench, hammock and a subscription to NEBRASKAland magazine.

## Garden Guide

Things to do this month

By Mary Jane Frogge, UNL Horticulture Extension Associate

Be sure not to store apples or pears with vegetables. The fruits give off ethylene gas which speeds up the breakdown of vegetables and will cause them to develop off-flavors.

After the ground freezes, mulch small fruit plants such as strawberries. One inch of straw or leaves is ideal for strawberries.

Remove all mummified fruit from fruit trees and rake up and destroy those on the ground. Also, rake and dispose of apple and cherry leaves. Good sanitation practices reduce reinfestation of insects and diseases the following season.

African violets do well when potted in small pots. A good general rule is to use a pot one-third the diameter of the plant. Encourage African violets to bloom by giving them plenty of light. They can be in a south window during dark winter months. They bloom beautifully under fluorescent lights.

Clean power tools of all plant material and dirt. Replace worn spark plugs, oil all necessary parts and sharpen blades. Store all tools in their proper place indoors, never outdoors where they will rust over the winter.

Clean and fix all hand tools. Repaint handles or identification marks that have faded over the summer. Sharpen all blades and remove any rust.

Order seed catalogs now for garden planning in January. For variety, consider companies that specialize in old and rare varieties or wild flowers.

Bring out the bird feeders and stock them with bird seed for the birds. Remember to provide fresh water for them too.

Place Christmas trees away from fireplaces, radiators, heat vents and anything else that could dry the needles. Keep your Christmas tree well watered from the time it is brought home until it is discarded.

Minimize traffic on a frozen lawn to reduce winter damage.

Inspect trees and shrubs for bagworm capsules. Remove and destroy them to reduce next year's pest population.

House plants with large leaves and smooth foliage such as philodendrons, dracaena and rubber plant, benefit if their leaves are washed with a damp cloth to remove dust.

Start reviewing your garden notes to help with next year's plans.

Check fruits, vegetables, corms and tubers that you have in storage. Sort out any that show signs of rot and dispose of them.