

Common Houseplant Problems

Lancaster County

444 Cherrycreek Road, Suite A / Lincoln, NE 68528
(402) 441-7180 / <http://lancaster.unl.edu>

Reprinted from *The Nebrline*, November/December 2005

[315]

Mary Jane Frogge
UNL Extension Associate

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.

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



Photo by UNL Extension Associate Soni Cochran

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

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

Continued on next page



Photo by UNL Extension Assistant Vicki Jedlicka

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

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 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 development

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.

Proper care of your houseplants will insure that you will be able to enjoy your plants for years to come.