

CARING FOR INDOOR PLANTS

By Maritta Perry Grau, Master Gardener

With the holidays and festive parties coming up, you may be receiving gifts of houseplants. And you may have some herbs, geraniums, coleus, or tropical/subtropical plants you brought into the house this past fall to overwinter until more seasonable weather returns next spring. We advised in October and November that as much as possible in winter, you should try to approximate indoors the light and temperatures that kept your plants healthy when they were outdoors. Like their outdoor cousins, houseplants have similar needs, no matter the species: watering, maintenance (cleaning leaves, pruning, pinching back, deadheading), dividing and repotting as they grow, and controlling pests and diseases (to be covered in January). Many of your questions can be answered at <https://extension.umd.edu/programs/program-areas>.

Watering -- When and how much to water will depend on the type of plants. In general, experts at the University of Maryland (<https://extension.umd.edu/resource/watering-indoor-plants>) recommend watering the plant when the top one-half to one inch of soil feels dry. Cacti and succulents may be watered less often, while flowering plants may need watering a little more often. Some plants are best watered from the bottom of the pot.

Maintenance -- Outside, the rain or your garden hose rinses away dust. Indoors, you may wipe broad leaves with a damp cloth, get into crevices with a Q-tip, or mimic that rain by dunking the plant under a shower or drenching the soil in the sink. Cleaning houseplant leaves helps your plant have a better appearance, and you may also be removing pests or diseases as you clean. With hairy leaves, such as African violets, use a soft pastry brush to remove the dust. And of course, removing the dust helps light get to the leaves so they can grow and bloom better.

Depending on the size of the plant, you might want to prune occasionally—snipping back leggy branches or stems, and cutting off yellowed and dead leaves. With some plants, such as coleus, basil, or trailing plants and vines, you can root the cuttings to make new plants. Make the cuts just above a bud or side shoots.

Deadheading the flowers also encourages new growth and prevents stems from getting too leggy. Some dried flower heads, such as the tiny star-like ones from the hoyo vine, can be used as package decorations. I like to dab glitter on them or paint them with a touch of gold or silver paint for a decorative touch.

Dividing and repotting -- As mentioned above, you can make new plants by rooting cuttings: root begonias, coleus, polka-dot-plant, ivy, and philodendron stems in water. Depending on the type, succulents seem to root best if first dried on a paper towel for a few days, then simply laid on top of the soil and misted every two or three days (<https://extension.wvu.edu/lawn-gardening-pests/indoor-plants/succulents-101>). Woody-stemmed plants should be coated with a rooting enzyme and planted in the soil. When bromeliads get new spikes of growth at soil level, cut them out and plant them. With some vines, pin a bit of stem to the soil and it will root there. Spider plants produce lots of small plantlets; you can snip those off, soak the plantlet in a saucer of water overnight, then plant it in a new pot of soil.

Now and then, check the plants/pots to see if they need repotting. If roots are growing out of the bottom of the pot, prune the roots and put it back in the same pot with fresh soil, or transfer the plant to a slightly larger pot.

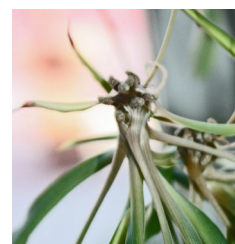
Save fertilizing for spring, and watch for our follow-up article on controlling pests and diseases on houseplants in January.

You should know that Frederick County Master Gardener seminars and other activities—except those held outdoors or at locations other than the Extension Office—are still cancelled until further notice. In the meantime, you can find gardening information and advice online at: University of MD Extension Home & Garden Information Center, <https://extension.umd.edu/programs/environmentnatural-resources/program-areas/home-and-garden-information-center>; Frederick County Master Gardeners Publications, <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening>; Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland>; or call us with gardening questions at [301-600-1596](tel:301-600-1596).



Coleus and dahlias. Dark burgundy coleus leaves edged with chartreuse complement the soft apricot-colored dahlias in this fall arrangement. The coleus will root, creating new plants, but the dahlias and chrysanthemums will be discarded. (courtesy photo)

Spider plantlets. The spider plant produces many little plantlets that seem to grow upside-down. The rootlets are at the top of the new plant, with leaves growing down. Cut the plantlet from its stem, soak the rootlets in a saucer of water overnight, then plant in a pot of soil. (courtesy photo)



Succulents. Succulents pictured above have rooted and grown. Small leaves or rosettes can be taken from the mother plants pictured, laid on the soil surface, and misted every few days to grow new ones. (courtesy photo)

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: <http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening> or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596.

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