DIVISION OF
AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES
AND NATURAL RESOURCES
NEWS RELEASE

It’s time to focus on indoor plants

With the massive ice storm that just hit Oklahoma, it’s a sure bet gardeners don’t have many outdoor plants left to take care of. This is the time of year when they focus their attention more on their indoor plants.

Growing plants indoors is a bit different than growing them outside, partly due to the gardener having more control over things such as temperature, light and humidity, as well as soil nutrients and potting medium.

Just as humans need light to survive, so do plants - even those plants that prefer mostly shade. Most houseplants require the light that would be found within 4 feet to 8 feet of a bright south-facing window. Some houseplants will thrive in a spot right next to the window, while others prefer less natural light some distance away.

Finding the right amount of light can be tricky because too little light can result in tall, lanky, small-leafed plants, while too much light can cause leaf burn on sensitive species. Keep in mind, however, if you don’t have great natural light, grow lights can be the solution.

Plants do best in an environment that’s between 65 and 75 degrees Fahrenheit and prefer a relative humidity of about 50% to 60%. While this humidity level is higher than what most people like, gardeners can use a humidifier near plants. Another option is to set pots on a tray of moist gravel or pebbles. Make sure the water level on the gravel doesn’t touch the bottom of the pot because that can cause wicking. This leads to the plant getting too wet and causing root rot.

The main cause of demise of houseplants is improper watering. Most houseplants need to be thoroughly watered and then allowed to nearly dry out before the next watering. It’s a good idea to use tepid water. Water the plant until water drains freely through the drain hole in the pot.

Along with proper light and moisture, drainage is key to houseplant care. It’s not a good idea to use aggregates in the bottom of the pots since they can actually slow the movement of water through the pot. If you have a favorite pot that doesn’t have drain holes, consider the pot-in-pot method. Put the plant in a container with drain holes, then set that pot into your larger, decorative pot. Make sure excess moisture doesn’t collect in the outer pot. You may want to add some crushed rocks or pebbles in the bottom of the outer pot to help keep the plant’s roots out of standing water.

Another helpful tip for caring for indoor plants is to make sure the potting medium has good water-holding capability, but also promotes good drainage and aeration.

Fertilization generally isn't necessary during the winter months because most plants are growing very little or resting. Houseplants need to be fertilized periodically when actively growing in the spring and summer. Indoor gardeners can begin to fertilize houseplants in March or April as growing conditions improve and the plants resume growth.

Oklahoma State University Extension offers more houseplant care information on its website.