



## School Gardens

# Houseplants

## Indoor Gardening with Teens, Kids or for You!

Having beautiful green plants in any room is like bringing a part of nature into your home. They create a peaceful and healthy environment in any living space. You can have a rewarding experience when a plant you are taking care of is healthy and thriving. Keeping houseplants healthy may seem intimidating to even experienced gardeners. However, there are some simple steps that can be taken to keep any houseplant growing and thriving in the right environment.



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## Location, Lighting and Temperature



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All plants require lighting for photosynthesis, a process in which plants use the sun's energy to create carbohydrates, the essential food needed for the plant's health and its growth. However, plants are different in their requirement for sunlight. Therefore, it is important that you know your plant and its specific needs. For example, Spider plants prosper in bright light, while Peace lilies prefer medium light. Pothos can grow in almost any light condition. It is best to place plants in locations in the room which meet their specific lighting needs. Most houseplants are accustomed to indoor temperatures, but in San Diego they can also be placed outdoors on most temperate days.

## Watering

Overwatering and underwatering are some of the common mistakes made with houseplants. Too much water can cause root-rot and growth of pathogens and fungus, but too little water will cause yellow leaves and lack of luster and proper growth. In both cases, the plants could be lost. Again, it is best to know your plants, as the needs for water vary from plant to plant. For example, Ponytail palms are a form of succulent and store water in their trunk. They only need to be watered every 2-3 weeks. Rubber plants like to have moist soil during the growing seasons of spring and summer, but it would be important to cut back on watering them during winter. It is advisable to check the soil by placing your finger or a moisture meter in it to determine if the plant should be watered. Do not water if the soil is moist. Plants like moisture in the air, so in our dry climate you would need to spray them with water at times. This can also clean the surface of the leaves of dust and any potential pests. It is also important to empty the dish under the plant after watering, as plants don't like to sit in a pool of water.



## Feeding

Plants need certain minerals such as nitrogen, potassium, iron, phosphorus etc. to grow and thrive. This is where fertilizers come in, available to purchase at most garden centers. Find an organic fertilizer that is suited for houseplants. Liquid fertilizers are easier to use and work well with houseplants. Use the recommended amount on the label. Place the fertilizer in the water when watering. Normally, it is advisable to fertilize every 2 -3 weeks during the growing seasons, which are spring and early summer. Fertilizing should be reduced to every 4-5 weeks during fall and winter seasons.

## Pruning

It is important that your plants are pruned as needed to keep them lush and growing properly. First, cut away all the dead and decaying parts that are no longer green and healthy. Next, you should cut the parts of the plant that are either too long or growing in the wrong direction. Use healthy cuttings for propagation of new plants. This can be fun and rewarding.

## Propagation



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There are several ways that you can take parts of your existing plant or the healthy clippings from pruning and propagate them into new plants. The two easiest and most often used methods are propagation in water or directly in soil. Many houseplants can easily be propagated in water. There are portions of the stem that are enlarged in diameter where leaves and buds grow; these are called **nodes**. This is also the most likely place for new roots to appear when propagating. It is important that the cuttings for new plants be about half to one inch below the node. These cuttings can then be placed in clean/filtered water or potting soil for the new root growth.

## Potting and Repotting

Once the cuttings have developed some strong roots, they can be potted so they have more room to grow into a full-size plant. The pots selected for this purpose must have an even bottom and 3-4 holes for drainage so water can drain easily, otherwise, accumulation of water in the bottom can cause root rot. It is important that the soil used for potting is a good mix and contains some of the natural nutrients necessary for healthy growth. It is also very important that the soil has good drainage to prevent fungus and root rot. Repotting plants is also another important function of keeping your plant healthy and growing. Every plant is very likely to outgrow its pot, so to give its roots room to spread you may occasionally need to place them in a larger pot. Please follow the same principles given above for potting the cuttings, since they also apply to repotting a plant.



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## Pest and Pathogen Management

You could have a beautiful plant, but if you are not watchful, pests and pathogens can destroy your plant. The most common houseplant pests are scale, mealy bugs, spider mites, whiteflies and aphids. Powdery mildew, wilt, leaf spots and blight are some of the pathogens which can also attack houseplants. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is the best way to keep bugs and fungus under control. The following link to the UC Agriculture and Natural Resources IPM website has a great deal of information on prevention and elimination of damage caused by pests. <https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PestNotes/pn74172.html>

**More questions? Visit [MasterGardenerSD.org](https://www.mastergardener.org) “Solve A Problem” to call or email our hotline.**