

Winter's hard on houseplants

A heated indoor environment may be comfortable for people, but it isn't always for plants, especially during the winter months.

"Houseplants may suffer from any one or a combination of problems in the winter, including inadequate watering and fertilizing and low humidity," says Ray McNeilan, Oregon State University extension home gardening agent.

"No simple rules apply to any of these practices," McNeilan continues. "Houseplant watering practices are a good example."

Some plants grow best if the soil dries out moderately between watering, while others are better off if the soil is kept moist.

The best guide to when to water is the soil crumble test, according to McNeilan. In most cases, a plant needs water when the surface soil crumbles between the fingers. Fast

growing plants, plants left in the sunlight, or plants in small pots will need more frequent watering than those plants in opposite conditions.

When watering, water the soil thoroughly and let the excess drain from the bottom of the pot. Pour off any water that collects around the bottom of the pot after waiting about 20 minutes. Never leave a plant standing in a puddle of water.

Other houseplant watering don'ts include: don't water according to a schedule, and don't water too little.

Plants use water at different rates. If they receive water at regular intervals, they may be getting too little or too much. However, too much water does more damage than too little.

Like watering, fertilizing of indoor plants in the winter should be based on observation. McNeilan recommends giving plant

food only to plants that are making active growth. They should be fed once a month with any houseplant fertilizer, whether liquid or dry.

Houseplants that aren't making any noticeable growth don't need to be fertilized.

Another factor that affects the health of houseplants is humidity, or the moisture in the air.

Generally, most homes are too dry for plants in the winter, says McNeilan. However, no set rule for humidity levels applies to all situations.

For instance, ferns like lots of moisture, while the desert cactus prefers drier air. If steps are taken to modify the humidity in certain parts of the house, be sure to place plants with similar humidity needs together.

"There are several ways to furnish extra moisture and increase overall

humidity," McNeilan explains. Most hot-air furnaces can be equipped with humidifiers, or pans can be placed near heat registers to evaporate water.

Special plant stands or tables with metal-lined trays containing a layer of moist sand or gravel are also useful.

Placing the potted plant on a shallow tray filled with an inch of pebbles or sand and half an inch of water is one of the simplest ways to provide extra moisture. Make sure the water doesn't touch the bottom of the pot. The constant evaporation of water raises the humidity in the air around the plant three to five times as much as in the rest of the room.

"Misting or sprinkling house plants is not an effective way to increase the humidity," McNeilan says. "The effect of misting is temporary at best, and furthermore, misting plants is an invitation to mildew and other plant diseases."

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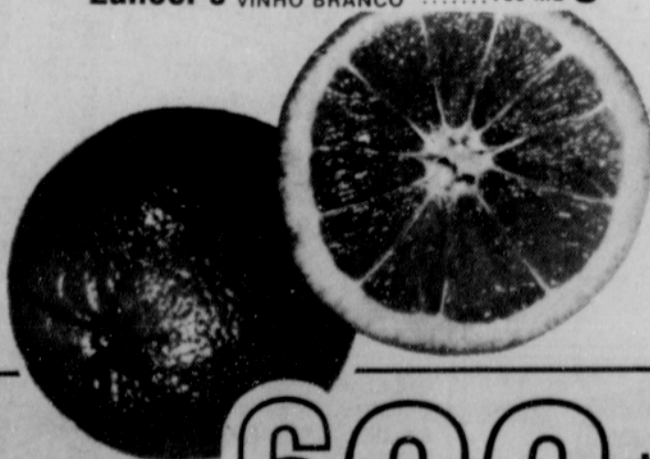
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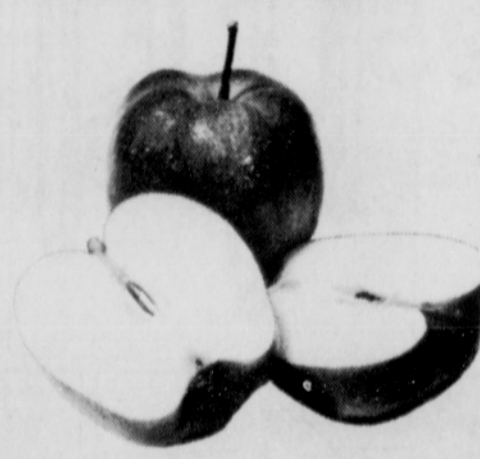
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