



November Tips

INTERIOR GARDENING

by Diane Relf, Extension Specialist, Environmental Horticulture

- *Dracaena marginata* and *spathiphyllum* do not react well to extreme temperature changes. To protect them from cold temperature blasts, move plants away from doorways. If plants experience chilling, they probably will drop their leaves.
- Potted geraniums grown indoors should be allowed to become somewhat dry before being watered. They need plenty of sun to promote vigorous growth and flowering.
- When grouping potted plants together to give them the benefit of increased humidity, allow the leaves of each plant to lay in a natural position; don't jam.
- During the cooler temperatures and shorter days of the winter months, the growth rate of most houseplants slows. Unless plants are grown under an artificial light source that is left on 16 hours per day, new growth will be minimal until spring. Reduce fertilization and water until late April or May when new growth resumes.
- If you have a tendency to overwater houseplants, try root protection cushions. Fit these thick, mesh cushions (they look like round pot scrubbers) into the bottom of a pot when repotting. They let excess water drain away, allowing oxygen to circulate around the roots. When using a pot with drainage holes inside a decorative pot, place a cushion in the bottom of the decorative pot. When watered, the plant won't sit in the water that gathers in the outer pot.
- Try dwarf varieties of annual flowers to use as houseplants this winter. Asters, calendulas, celosias, and marigolds come in compact, colorful cultivars that can be maintained in the home if sufficient light is provided.
- *Amaryllis* bulbs may not bloom if they are in too large a pot. There should be no more than one inch of space on each side of the bulb. At least one third of the bulb should be above the soil line.
- *Cyclamen* is an exception in indoor plants; it should be fed and watered all through the winter.
- Staghorn ferns are epiphytes and should not be planted in ordinary potting soil. Grow on a slab of *osmunda* or wood. To grow on wood, put a large handful of moist, long-fiber, sphagnum moss on the wood, place the base of the fern on the moss, then tie it all to the wood with fishing line. Water by soaking in a bucket or the sink. As the fern grows, it will attach itself to the wood.

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- African violets do well when potted in rather small pots. A good general rule is to use a pot one-third the diameter of the plant. To humidify African violets, surround the pot with moist peat contained in a second pot. When buying new plants, avoid those with any signs of yellowing leaves.
- Encourage African violets to bloom by giving them plenty of light. They can be in a south window during dark, winter months. They bloom beautifully under fluorescent lights. In fact, they seem to grow better under them. They should be fertilized at every watering, using a one-fourth strength solution. Water from the top, to prevent salt build-up in the soil, but avoid wetting the leaves.
- Explore bonsai -- the ancient oriental art of dwarfing and shaping container-grown trees. Many libraries have how-to books on the subject. Plants suitable for bonsai work that can be treated as house plants include pyracantha, common myrtle, gardenia, and small-leaved azaleas. These miniature trees make fascinating displays in all stages of training.
- The miniature jade tree (*Portulacaria afra* 'Variegata') makes an excellent, natural bonsai. Pinch the growing tips to encourage branching and keep the plant pot-bound.
- An indoor garden light can serve more than one purpose. It can be a night light, room light, or safety light, helping to offset the cost attributed to the plants. Also, the lighted garden can be used as furniture, a room divider, or a focal point of home decor.
- Hanging plants look their best when hung at or above eye level.
- If you use plastic pots instead of clay pots for your potted plants, you won't have to water as often. Be careful not to overwater. Clay pots absorb excess soil moisture, minimizing danger of overwatering.
- Large plants are easier to move if kept on platforms with casters.
- An attractive, inexpensive window garden can be created by rooting plant cuttings in tinted-glass containers.
- Soil pulled away from the pot rim means inadequate watering and resulting root problems. It will be difficult to add sufficient water overhead to rewet the soil. Soak the pot in a sink full of water, then drain it thoroughly.
- A different way of starting an avocado plant is to remove the pit from the fruit and wrap it in a moist paper towel, then place it in a plastic bag and close the bag. Place this package in a warm place, checking on it every few days to see if the towel needs to be moistened. When roots appear, pot it up.

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- Most plants should not be watered until the soil feels dry. Water thoroughly, let the water soak in, then water again until water drains into the saucer. Empty the saucer within an hour.
- Be sure to close shades at night to insulate window plants from cold outdoor temperatures. Slip a newspaper between potted plants and the window pane for extra protection against the chill.
- Remember cacti go dormant during the winter, so be sure to keep them cool (around 50F) and withhold water until they show signs of growth in spring.
- Plant paper-white narcissus in stones in a bulb pan in early November to have blooms for Christmas time.
- Insufficient light will cause a jade plant to lose most of its old, thick leaves and grow thin, new ones on spindly stems. While jade will survive low light, it needs as much direct sunlight as possible to look its best.
- African violets require a day temperature of 70F and a night temperature of 65F. They may die if the air temperature dips below 55F. African violets do well under fluorescent lights 12 to 14 hours a day; lights should be 8 to 12 inches from the plant.
- For an exotic house plant, try growing a mango tree. Deep within the flesh of the mango fruit, there is a large, hairy husk and within this husk, is the seed. Scrape the fruit from the husk, and allow the seed to dry overnight. The next day, nick the husk and gently pry it open with a dull knife. The seed is very large and is best started in a plastic bag filled with damp sphagnum moss. It will germinate in two to three weeks and will become a slow-growing, leathery-leaved tree.
- Though November brings an end to outdoor gardens, there are many ways to enjoy plants over the winter. Fluorescent lighting makes a collection of African violets or small foliage plants thrive where there is little or no natural light. Commercial grow-lights are available, or you can save money by creating your own setup. You'll need two fluorescent tubes – one "cool" blue and one "warm" red -with a reflector to focus the light on the plants. Hang the lights 12 to 18 inches above most plants. Be aware that the ends of the tubes give off less light than the center; arrange plants accordingly.

Monthly Tips have been prepared since 1986 by various staff of the Office of Consumer Horticulture including Ellen Bennett, Michelle Buckstrup, Susan Day, Susan DeBolt, Sharon Dendy, Kate Dobbs, Sheri Dom, David Gravell, Virginia Nathan, Jenny Shuster, Ellen Silva, and Ruth Sorenson. Resource material for the development of this information includes the Virginia Master Gardener Handbook; Extension Publications and newsletters from VCE, numerous other states, and the USDA; and an extensive library of over 900 books, magazines and journals. Project funded by The Virginia Gardener Newsletter subscription fees. Diane Relf, Project Director and Content Specialist.

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