



A Dozen Houseplants for Low-Light Situations

Plants are an important part of making our homes healthier and more inviting. They soften the visual environment at the same time they are working hard to remove pollutants from interior spaces. Whatever your choice of decorating style -casual, formal, modern, or rustic – there is a plant that will fit in perfectly, especially combined with the right container. In order to thrive, however, your perfect plant has specific needs that must be met. Most of these – water, fertilization, temperature and humidity – can be manipulated. If you do not have a lot of light in the room you want to decorate though, it is important to choose houseplants that will be happy there. Fortunately, you still have many options and, as you will see, even ‘low-light’ represents a continuum of choices.

a few parameters for evaluating low-light situations

Spending a little time observing and evaluating the area you wish to fill with plants is helpful so you can make the right choice. Since this is a little subjective, here are the definitions we used in our list of low-light houseplants:

- **Shade/Poor Light** – well away (more than 8 feet) from a window; areas such as hallways, staircases, corners, or near windows obstructed by trees or buildings; an area where there is no direct light but where at least part of the day you could read a newspaper without turning on the light.
- **Semi-Shade/ Moderate Light** – within 5 – 8 feet of a bright or sunlit window; close to a sunless (north-facing) window; or where light from the window is reduced by trees or structures outside for all or part of the day.
- **Bright but Sunless/Indirect Light** – within the area about 5 feet from a bright window which is sunlit for part of the day; this is typical of conditions in east and west-facing rooms. A large, sunless windowsill may provide similar conditions. This would also define a room whose southern windows are shaded by translucent curtains or filtered by nearby leafy trees.

Plants who prefer bright but sunless light may adapt to semi-shade conditions and some semi-shade plants can adapt to shade for awhile, some even permanently. During winter months, the intensity of sunlight is lower and the angle of light coming into your home will be different. This means that plants which prefer indirect light will benefit by being closer to the sunny windows and even those who don't like direct light will be happy moving closer for a winter vacation.

a few faithful soldiers for shade /poor light

Aglaonema hybrids – Chinese Evergreen: An excellent choice to brighten low-light areas, this native of the subtropical forests of Southeast Asia has graceful, upright foliage in shades of green marbled with silver, pink, red and cream. *Aglaonema* needs even moisture, average humidity and a warm (60°-75°) location out of cool drafts. Fertilize lightly every month from spring through summer. It likes to be root-bound and should not be pruned because all new growth comes from the crown. Pair with a pothos in the same container if it starts to look leggy. Sap and berries are poisonous so *Aglaonema* is not safe for households with children and pets.

***Epipremnum aureum* ‘Neon’ – Devil’s Ivy and *Scindapsus pictus* ‘Argyraeus’ – Satin Pothos:** From a variety of cultivars, two choices for a tabletop or shelf: ‘Neon’ has bright chartreuse leaves and ‘Argyraeus’ has dusky green foliage splashed with silver. These two related plants share the common name of pothos, come from the jungles of Malaysia and can trail 20 - 40 feet in the wild. Unlike the similar-looking philodendron, it has a ridged stem and somewhat denser habit. It does well in all of the lower light categories though it may lose some color intensity in the lowest light. Pothos plants need to stay warm (65° - 85°), do not tolerate cold drafts, and like moderate to high humidity. Be careful not to overwater, letting soil dry out somewhat before watering and keeping barely moist in winter. Fertilize very lightly during the growing season and keep pot bound. Cut back long runners to keep it bushy – they can be used for stem cuttings. Use caution because the sap can cause skin irritation and burning in the mouth if ingested so it is not a safe choice for households with children and pets.

***Sansevieria trifasciata* – Snake Plant:** *Sansevieria*’s many different patterns of green, yellow, white and gold and the architectural, upright form give this old favorite a dynamic flair that will add excitement to table tops and corners. This South African native is also known as Mother-in-Law’s Tongue ‘because of its sharpness’ and is given variations on sword names in other countries. It truly lives up to its reputation of being ‘impossible to kill,’ because it thrives in all types of light, needs only regular household temperatures (60° – 80°), tolerates low humidity and needs very little watering (especially in winter). Use a liquid cactus plant food during the spring and summer. Snake Plant can stay in the same pot for many years and is immune to pests and diseases. Its sap is somewhat toxic and may cause mild irritation.

***Zamioculcas zamiifolia* – ZZ Plant:** Fondly known by its initials, this East African plant is our solution for just about any situation. ZZ has an upright, vase shape that is graceful and contemporary and thick, succulent foliage that is durable and so glossy that it reflects any available light. ZZ can grow in all light aspects except direct summer sunlight which may cause leaf scorch. It is a very slow-growing plant so it is worth it to invest in a larger plant, though by increasing light you will have more growth. ZZ is very forgiving if you forget to water – in fact, over-watering is about the only way to kill it! Let the top 2” dry out before watering again, give it average indoor temperatures and humidity and fertilize lightly when actively growing. ZZ is not bothered by pests or diseases but all parts are extremely poisonous and should be kept away from children and pets.

our picks for semi-shade/moderate light

***Anthurium* spp. – Flamingo Flower:** One of the few flowering plants for low light, *Anthurium* is an epiphytic plant from Columbia and Ecuador evoking a tropical paradise or Hawaiian wedding. Its colorful, long-lasting “bloom” – actually a modified leaf called a spathe – can be red, pink, or white and forms a cowl for the upright stalk that holds the tiny true flowers. *Anthurium* does fine in semi-shade and even better in a bright but sunless spot where it may flower more. Keep soil evenly moist from spring through fall (slightly drier in winter) and boost the humidity as much as possible by using a room humidifier or humidity trays. *Anthurium* likes temperatures 75° – 85° during the day and 10° lower at night and needs a high-phosphorus fertilizer during spring and summer. It is not troubled by serious insect or disease problems but the leaves cause severe burning in the mouth when ingested, so it should be kept away from children and pets.

Ferns – Bird’s Nest, Boston, Button, Crocodile, Maidenhair, Rabbit’s Foot, Table: Ferns are the perfect plant for low-light situations and these seven are commonly available and provide such a variety of textures that a lush display for a side-table or bookcase can be easily put together. Their natural environment of filtered light, cool, moist air,

and consistently wet but well-drained soil takes a little bit of work to re-create in the home environment, but is well worth the effort. Ferns can take normal household temperatures of 60° – 80°, but at temperatures above 70° it will be necessary to be vigilant about increasing the humidity with misting or humidity trays. Almost all ferns can take temperatures down to 50°, but watering should be reduced. Yellowing fronds are a sign of over-watering. Ferns like to be pot-bound and feeding monthly with a high-nitrogen liquid fertilizer diluted at ¼- to ½-strength will assure lush green growth. *Nephrolepis exaltata*/Boston Fern, *Microsorium musifolium* ‘Crocodyllus’/Crocodile Fern and *Asplenium nidus*/Bird’s Nest Fern are the largest and toughest of this group and look incredible displayed in an urn on a plant stand or maybe in a hanging basket. Boston ferns are often pot bound, leading to complaints of falling fronds – keep them well-watered and you will avoid this problem. Crocodile and Bird’s Nest ferns both have cup-like centers and must be watered carefully to avoid crown rot. *Adiantum*/Maidenhair Fern, *Davallia canariensis*/Rabbit’s Foot Fern, *Pellea rotundifolia*/Button Fern and *Pteris cretica*/Table Fern are all smaller ferns that are lovely grouped loosely with photos and art objects on tables and shelves – just remember to give each a humidity try and make sure they are not near a heating vent.

***Calathea makoyana* – Peacock Plant:** A dramatic, medium-sized plant, *Calathea* has leaves with pinkish red undersides and tops that look as if someone painted a fern frond on them. They are a little fussy about care, needing a warm, humid environment with temperatures from 70° – 85°. Keep the soil evenly moist at all times and use humidity trays and mist frequently. If leaves turn yellow or brown, it is likely that the air is too dry. Direct sun will dull the flamboyant leaf markings but pale leaves indicate a lack of nitrogen or iron. Feed monthly with a balanced fertilizer at half-strength from spring through fall but do not feed in winter.

***Ficus lyrata* – Fiddleleaf Fig:** This appealing member of the fig family has huge, dramatic leaves on upward-reaching branches. It can reach 40 feet in its native habitat of South Asia to Australia but is a more manageable 3’ – 10’ when grown in a pot. *Ficus lyrata* grows faster and is a little less finicky than its more well-known cousin *Ficus benjamina* but it has some of the same characteristics, liking to be kept warm (60° – 80°), evenly moist, in moderate humidity, and away from drafts and heating and air conditioning vents. Fiddleleaf fig will tend to develop along a single stem, so judicious pruning of the tops of young plants will promote branching and bushiness. Use the smallest pot that will contain its roots and place in a heavier cachepot to keep from toppling. Although its milky sap can be irritating, *Ficus lyrata* is generally considered to be safe for pets and children to be around.

bowood's best for bright but sunless / indirect light

Bromeliads – *Cryptanthus*/*Guzmania*/*Neo-regalia*/*Tillandsia*: Bromeliads are epiphytcal plants which grow in the rocks and trees of the wet and humid tropical forests of Central and South America. They come in a variety of colors, patterns and shapes – these four are favorites that will bring fantastic texture and a tropical feel to any room without needing strong direct sunshine. They are best displayed where the sculptural rosettes of leaves can be viewed from above. *Cryptanthus* has a shorter, flatter shape and small flowers but has a jazzy striped pattern on its wavy-edged leaves. When *Guzmania* is mature enough to flower, its top leaves (bracts) turn shades of yellow and orange. It holds this color for 5 months or more and then a stalk develops with a spectacularly brilliant pink or red flower. *Neo-regalia* is more about foliage than its small flowers, developing an orange, yellow, deep red to burgundy central cup amidst its glossy deep green, speckled or striped leaves. All three of these bromeliads prefer bright, indirect light and appreciate high humidity and warm temperatures of 70° – 75° during the day and 10° lower at night. Allow the potting mix to dry out between waterings – they have small roots which die if they get overwatered. Use a liquid

fertilizer at ½-strength during the growing season; you may spray it on the leaves but don't pour it into the cup of the plant. When these bromeliads have finished flowering, cut off the flower-stalk. The main plant will begin to decline in order to send energy to the small, new plants – pups – that are growing from under the mother plant. When the pups are about several inches tall, cut them off and plant them in a small pot of loose soil. They will bloom in 1-3 years. *Tillandsias*, also known as air plants, come in a myriad of different forms and have spectacular pink and blue flowering stalks. They differ from the other three because they aren't rooted in soil but can be set on dishes or perched in vases as well as placed in terrariums. Their specialized care is covered in another tip sheet but basically they just need to be soaked or gently sprayed down once or twice a week, drained carefully, and put back on display.

***Dracaena deremensis* 'Limelight' – Striped Dracaena:** *Dracaenas* have long been a mainstay in any houseplant display, especially where light is at a premium, but 'Limelight' is so exceptionally bright and dynamic that it needs special mention. Its full, upright habit and chartreuse foliage make it perfect for softening the angles of contemporary furniture or jazzing up the base of a tropical grouping. Bright, indirect light is perfect for this *Dracaena* as too much light will make its color fade. Like other *Dracaenas*, it appreciates consistent warm temperatures, basic household humidity, and very light fertilization during the summer months. Allow the soil to dry out before watering again and use water that has stayed out overnight to reduce discoloration of the foliage. *Dracaenas* like to be root-bound, rarely attract pests, and are considered poisonous to dogs and cats but not to humans.

***Chamaedorea seifrizii* – Bamboo/Reed Palm:** This durable, easygoing palm is great for bringing the essence of the tropics to an indoor space because it is naturally short and makes its own bamboo-like grove, giving it a lush appearance. Each tan-colored stem holds around ten graceful, fan-shaped fronds at varying heights that adds depth as well as height. In the summer, this native of Mexico and Central America is excellent for screening your deck or balcony or add stature to your patio plantings – just remember to protect it from direct sun. Inside, it can live in low and moderate light if you don't overwater, but it will grow faster in bright, indirect light. Like all palms, *Chamaedorea* likes high humidity, warm temperatures (65° – 90°) and needs to be fed during the growing season with a high-nitrogen fertilizer. With strong light it will produce flowers and clusters of inedible fruit which are skin-irritants.

***Spathiphyllum floribundum* – Peace Lily:** This beloved flowering houseplant gained its common name of Peace Lily because it symbolizes transcendence from this earthly life and the rebirth of the soul. Dark green, lance-shaped leaves provide a beautiful background for the pure-white spathes that surround the spike covered with tiny flowers that last for 5 – 6 weeks. Although a *Spathiphyllum* can make do with very low light, they are fuller and more apt to flower in bright, indirect light. They prefer consistently moist soil, daily misting, light fertilization, and a warm, humid environment (68° – 85°). Although the peace lily likes to be pot bound, if you have an older plant that refuses to bloom it may be time to divide it, repotting the divisions in spring. The sap of the peace lily causes severe burning in the mouth and skin irritation and should not be kept near children and pets.

for more information...

...please see our Garden Tip Sheets on Watering Houseplants, Indoor Ferns, Palm Tree Care, and Tillandsia Care which can be found on our website. Our inventory of available houseplants is constantly changing – come in often to find new and different choices every visit. We are happy to help you choose the right plant for the right place – just ask!