



Having Happy Houseplants: General Tips on Watering

Just as each plant displays different qualities and attractions, each plant also comes with its own set of needs and preferences. When a plant moves into your house, you will want to get to know those needs and preferences. Your first task is to find the right spot for light and temperature. In order to keep your plant healthy and happy, though, your next job is to learn how, when, how often, and how much to water. It is beyond the scope of a single tip sheet to cover the watering needs for every variety of houseplant you may encounter, but below are some general ideas to get you started.

Basic Guidelines for Watering

- Plants that get more light generally use more water.
- Plants in warmer areas will need more water.
- Most plants need less water in winter due to lower light intensity. Late autumn to mid-spring is also a resting period for many plants and water needs will be reduced.
- On the other hand, you will probably check your plants daily during the summer months.
- Plants in small pots dry out more quickly than those in large pots.
- Porous clay pots allow moisture to pass through the sides of the container – which is good for the plants – but may require more frequent watering.
- Plastic and glazed pots will hold water longer and this may lead to plants being over-watered.
- Far more plants are damaged by too much water than too little. To make it more confusing, often the symptoms of “too much” look similar to the symptoms of “too little.” Review your watering habits to make a correct diagnosis.
- A personal relationship with each plant is needed. The longer you have a plant the more you can move from general knowledge to getting to know the needs and preferences of that particular plant in your particular environment.

How: Getting Your Technique Down

- Plants prefer a good soaking when they are watered. Use a watering can with a long, thin spout and insert it at the base of the plant, under the leaves. Add water until it is coming out of the drain holes.
- Wait 10-15 minutes for excess water to drain and then empty the saucer. Don't let your plants sit in water!
- To empty the saucers of large or unwieldy plants, suck up the water with a turkey baster or a dishrag.
- Make sure you water the whole surface of the soil around your plant, not just in one spot. This way even the roots along the sides of the pot will be watered.
- Some plants do not like water on their leaves or crowns. Immerse the pots in a sink in water up to just below the soil line until the soil surface glistens. Take them from the sink and let them drain completely.

When and How Often: Learn the ‘Fingertip Rule’

The task of watering should never become a scheduled routine – needs will vary among plants and will depend on the environment and the time of year. Once again, the best advice is to read up on your specific plants and their needs.

However, here are a few general hints:

- *Very few* plants like to be wet all the time – roots need air as well as water. *Moist* soil is different from *Wet* soil.
- When the water drains freely from the bottom holes of the pot you will know the entire rootball has been washed with water. If you don’t empty the saucer, however, the roots at the bottom of the pot will be sitting in water and may die.
- Evaluating the soil surface visually is an indicator only for plants classified as needing to be “moist at all times.” For these plants, don’t let that surface get to the point of looking dry and powdery – it should *look* dark and moist!
- What about all the other plants? Use the Fingertip Rule: insert your finger into the soil to the second knuckle (about 2” deep) when you know your plant is well-hydrated. With time you will learn the moisture levels necessary for each plant and keep them in their preferred state.
- If your plant is looking happy and healthy when you buy it, try the Fingertip Rule right away and remember how it felt as a comparison for when you take it home.
- A moisture meter is useful for large plants which may be rootbound and lack space for your fingertip.
- Cactus and succulent plants are fine with the Fingertip Rule only during the active growing season – spring to autumn. In the winter the soil should be allowed to dry out almost completely.

How Much Water?

- Pick up your plant (if you can!) when you know it needs water and compare the weight before and after you water it.
- For larger plants, measure the water you use. First, water to cover the surface and wait until that soaks in. Come back and water gently again. Do this until water drains out, keeping track of how much total water you use.
- Sometimes the potting soil will dry so much that it shrinks away from the sides of the pot and the water runs out without wetting the soil. Or the water may overflow the pot edges because the surface is caked and dry. In both cases you can use the immersion technique mentioned above to rewet the potting soil.

When Things Go Wrong...

First make sure that your environmental choices are correct – the right sun, temperature, and humidity for that particular plant – and that no pests or diseases are the culprit. Then you can evaluate symptoms with more accuracy.

Here are some things to look for:

- When leaves are limp and wilted this is usually a sign of soil dryness but may also be due to waterlogging (insufficient drainage or too much watering). Evaluate your actions to figure out which it is.
- When lower leaves dry up and fall it might be due to underwatering, but it might also be due to lack of light, or too much heat. These conditions also cause flowers to quickly fade and/or flower buds to fall.
- If there are spots or patches on the leaves that are crisp and brown or if the leaf edges are brown and dry it is usually due to underwatering. Leaves with brown tips usually need more humidity – use a humidifier or humidity trays.
- When leaves curl and fall it is a sign of overwatering, but it could also be cold air or cold drafts.
- When leaves are limp with soft, mushy areas or both old and young leaves fall at the same time it is a sign of severe overwatering. If you take the plant out of its pot, the roots will also look brown and mushy.
- If the plant only produces small, pale leaves, grows slowly or not at all it is due to overwatering when light is limited, either during winter or in an incorrect location during the summer growing period.