

ASK THE AG TEAM, for the week of January 13, 2008

Selecting the Best Houseplant Locations –*by Tim Baker, Horticulture Specialist, University of Missouri Extension, Daviess County*

One of the best ways to combat the dormant, drab, deep-freeze of winter is to bring plants into your home. While growing plants indoors is not too difficult, there are a few things that can be done to improve your success. The most important is to start right by selecting the best location for your plants.

Before deciding where to place your plants, try to think of how they grow in their natural habitat. You will need to come as close to these conditions in your home as you can, if the plant is to be healthy. The farther you stray from the natural conditions that the plant is used to, the more stress you introduce. This will result in more problems as the plant develops.

If the environment is too extreme, you can automatically expect problems. Most plants don't live in caves, for example. While your house may not be totally dark, the plant may be under severe stress under low light situations.

Some people use plants to fill empty spaces in their home. This may work, but keep in mind the plant's light requirements. Often the empty space may be in a corner, which is usually not well lighted. As a general rule of thumb, try to keep plants no more than ten feet from an average-sized window. This distance may need to be adjusted according to window size. The reason for the close distance to windows is that plants do best in natural light. Of course, the closer the plant can be placed to the window, the better. Most plants will do well right under the window itself, although some foliage plants may sunburn in direct sunlight.

If natural light is in shortage, you may need to supplement with artificial light. Fluorescent lights work well. The best usage of artificial light is to mix it with as much natural light as possible. Keep in mind that some plants have day length requirements for flowering, so extending the period of light may work against you in this situation.

Another general rule of thumb is that flowering plants will require more light than foliage plants. There are some exceptions, such as African violet. But if your plant does not need restricted light, it should be located as closely as possible to a bright window.

One precaution: be sure to keep plants away from the drying effect of heating vents and appliances. Sites that will be in the path of your heating system's forced air vents should be avoided at all costs. Plants will generally do better in cooler rooms, with night temperatures close to 60 degrees F and day temperatures between 70 and 75 degrees. If the temperature exceeds 80 degrees, many plants will have problems, especially if the humidity is low.

To see what your plant's requirements are for light and other growing conditions, two guide sheets are available which may help. "Caring for Houseplants" G6510, and "Lighting Indoor Plants" G6515 are available at your local University of Missouri Extension office.

Once you have the plant in the proper place, your job will be easier. Stress will be reduced (compared to poor sites), and problems will be less likely to arise. But you will still need to follow good horticultural practices. Regular watering, without overdoing it, is a must. Good humidity levels should be encouraged as well. One way to do this is to arrange your plants in groups.

Site selection for house plants is probably the most important factor for plant health. If you follow the above guidelines, you will have a better chance of success with your indoor gardening activities.