



Extension  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON  
IRON COUNTY

# NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

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## What Houseplants Try to Tell You

Houseplants can brighten up the indoors during the shorter and colder days of winter. Oftentimes houseplants may show a variety of symptoms, however, as indicators of potential issues with growing conditions.

With the change of seasons, significant changes in the environment around houseplants may cause them to start dropping leaves. For example, plants that spent their summer vacation out on the deck or porch had ideal light conditions. Now they are back inside often to a dimmer location. This change along with changes in air temperature around plants often leads to leaf drop.

Even plants that remained in the exact same location since summer may also show some leaf drop now. Quantity and quality are often marginal indoors; and now as days grow shorter and the sun angle gets lower in the sky, even less natural light is available. Add lots of cloudy days this time of year to the mix. Plants react by dropping leaves but also by slowing down in growth.

Keep this reduced growth in mind for many houseplants for the next few months. Water enough to keep them growing but avoid fertilizer to stimulate new growth. Wait until days start getting noticeably longer and brighter in spring to fertilize and encourage new growth. The exception would be when lighting is enhanced for plants through artificial sources.

One of the most common ailments of houseplants is browning leaf tips or margins. Rarely are insects or disease involved. Instead, consider both air and soil issues as the source. Heating homes means drier air, making browning leaf tips more common. Soil issues may include salts accumulating, excessive or lack of watering, poor drainage, or fertilizer burn. Analyze site conditions immediately around plants and adjust or move them to a better location.

Soil conditions can also be corrected by repotting into fresh soil. Containers should ideally have drainage holes in the bottom. Either double-pot or use a saucer underneath to avoid water damage to furniture or carpet. When watering, add enough water so it drains through the holes. This not only assures uniform water distribution, but also flushes out salts.

As with all plants, some research on the needs and care of various species will help assure a healthy, attractive plant all year. Like all of us, houseplants need to acclimate themselves for the less-than-ideal conditions winter presents.

Interested in learning more about Horticulture in Iron County?  
Feel free to contact:

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