

Houseplant Trouble-Shooting

General Care Information For Keeping Your House Plants Healthy

The best strategy for growing healthy house plants is to do enough of the right things so problems are unlikely to develop in the first place. That “prevent defense” is a lot easier than trying to stop disease, eliminate bugs and correct root damage after it occurs. Plants that are stressed in some way are usually the ones headed for trouble.

“Right” things include matching plants to their light needs, watering correctly, keeping plants away from heat vents and avoiding sudden changes in care or setting. For more on this, see our “House Plant Care” handout.

The point of this handout, though, is to help you: a.) determine if a problem is developing with your house plant; b.) figure out what’s wrong, and c.) decide what action, if any, to take.

Playing detective

Sometimes it’s fairly easy to figure out a plant problem, such as when the stems are covered with white gunk and you see little crawly white bugs everywhere. Other times there are no obvious reasons for symptoms of decline. The answer to that often turns out to be several plant-stressing factors working together to cause a general malaise.

Start by taking a good close-up look at the plant. Do you see any material that’s not a normal part of the plant, such as webbing, a cottony substance or sticky patches? Even more telling, is there anything moving around on or under the leaves? These are signs of bug activity.

There are five bugs that cause almost all of our house-plant woes:

1.) Aphids. These are tiny green, brown or reddish pear-shaped bugs that suck plant juices out of the stems and leaves. They’re often found clustered at shoot tips and around young buds. Look for sticky patches (a waste product) and leaves the curl downward.

2.) Mealybugs. These are gray-white oval insects that produce a waxy, cottony material and sticky patches. They also produce sticky patches and suck out plant juices.

3.) Scale. These are pin-head-sized bugs that latch onto a stem or leaf and become stationary under a hard shell. They may be red, light gray or black. They also suck plant juices.

4.) Spider mites. Tinier still, these speck-size arachnids prefer sucking juices from the undersides of leaves, which causes a yellowed, speckling appearance to the leaves. Fine webs also can often be seen.

5.) Whiteflies. Tiny flies with white wings that congregate on leaves and fly off when the plant is disturbed. They suck plant juices and cause leaves to yellow and mottled. They can also spread plant diseases.

Using a cotton swab dipped in alcohol can sometimes solve aphid and mealybug problems, if you’re persistent enough. Sprays of horticultural oil, neem oil, insecticidal soap or chemical insecticides also are effective. See our staff for help picking the right product for the pest you have. If possible, it’s best to spray outside (if warm enough) or in a garage. Don’t overlook your shower as an excellent pest-fighting apparatus that both dislodges bugs while leaching excess salt out of the potting medium.

If there are spots or streaks on the leaves but no apparent bugs, the problem could be a disease caused by a bacterium, fungus or virus. Try snipping off the damage and stop watering the leaves, if you’ve been doing that. If the problem persists, bring in a sample and our staff will be glad to help you diagnose it. Penn State University’s disease clinic also is available to nail down suspected diseases.

Improving care practices may help control disease, but there also are fungicides that can be considered.

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In the case of a plant virus or severe fungal or bacterial infection, the solution may be to throw out the plant.

Leaf damage also can be caused by too much light (sunburn), cold temperatures (anything below 50 degrees) and over- or under-watering.

Other problems and their causes

If only the leaf tips or edges are brown, there could be several causes behind that. Not enough water, dry air and a buildup of salt in the soil from fertilizer are all possibilities. If the soil is dry, water. If you see a white crust on the soil surface, leach the soil by running unsoftened water through it at an amount equal to about three times the pot's volume. If you suspect dry air, humidify the room or place the pot on a pebble tray filled with water.

Wilting is another symptom you might run across. Ironically, this can be a sign of either too much or not enough water. Stick your finger an inch or two down into the potting medium to determine dampness at the root zone. If it's bone-dry, water until the it comes out the drainage hole. If it's already wet, do NOT add more water. The wilting may be a result of root rotting from past over-watering.

Sometimes house plants will drop leaves. That may or may not be a cause for alarm, depending on the cause and whether it's a gradual or rapid leaf drop.

A gradual loss of leaves, especially from the bottom up, may be a matter of not enough light. New leaves sometimes block light reaching the lower leaves, and moving the plant to a brighter spot often solves it.

However, gradual leaf loss also can result from a nutrient deficiency (when's the last time you fertilized?) or from rotting roots (from over-watering?)

A rapid or sudden leaf loss is a shock response that usually happens after the plant is moved between inside and outside or even to a different spot inside where the light, temperature or humidity is different. (Ficus are particularly finicky about moves.) If the plant was otherwise healthy, it will usually adapt to the new spot and regrow its leaves.

And a few more things to watch for...

- Spindly growth. Skinny, weak stems and little leaves usually mean not enough light. Too much nitrogen also is possible.

- Plant doesn't flower. Not enough light. Or temperatures need to be cooler at night. Or lack of right nutrients. Or plant only flowers in certain seasons.

- Leaves are bleached or whitish. Probably too much light.

- Leaves are distorted. Check for aphids or mite. If leaves are also a mottled green and yellow, a virus is likely.

- Little black bugs flying out of soil. Probably fungus gnats (more of a nuisance than plant problem). Allow potting medium to dry between waterings and/or water in a labeled liquid insecticide to kill them.

- Yellowish foliage. Could be lack of fertilizer or not enough light.

- White powdery coating on leaves. Powdery mildew. Pick off infected leaves, improve air circulation and if problem persists, spray with a fungicide labeled for indoor mildew control.

Finally, remember that plants are like people — they run into more problems as they age. Their life spans are shortened further by the unnatural environment we make them live in. So if a plant that has given you years of trouble-free enjoyment suddenly starts going downhill, either try repotting it or chalk it up to simple old age. And there's nothing you can do about that, except buy a new, young, healthy whippersnapper.