

Chapter 1

A Houseplant Primer (Or What Makes a Plant a Houseplant)

In This Chapter

- ▶ Distinguishing real houseplants from houseplant wannabes
 - ▶ Knowing an ideal houseplant specimen when you see one
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For those of you in need of some houseplant preliminaries before you to move on to the “business end” of this book, you’ve turned to the right place. To begin with, just because a plant grows in a pot that doesn’t necessarily make it a houseplant, and not all houseplants spend their entire lives indoors. I can give you the dictionary definition of the term *houseplant*, but I’m sure you want a more detailed explanation of what is and isn’t a houseplant, which I gladly supply in the following pages.

Having Tropical Origins Helps

Perhaps you’ve had trouble in the past getting plants to flourish in your house (or at your workplace). The fact is, some plants make better houseplants than others.

Most houseplants — especially the easy-to-grow ones — originated in tropical or subtropical regions where they grow under the full shade of other plants, which makes them easy to adapt to growing under the “shade” of a roof. (*Tropical* climate regions never receive frost and *subtropical* regions experience brief dips below freezing only on rare occasions.)

Although you should never expose houseplants with tropical or subtropical origins to frost, most temperate weather plants are so well adapted to the cold that they not only can survive frost but *require* it in order to enjoy a full life cycle. (*Temperate* climates experience cold temperatures, often well below freezing in winter, sometimes for prolonged periods of time.)

Tropical and subtropical plants, therefore, make better houseplants than temperate climate ones because they can tolerate warm indoor temperatures year-round. Most temperate climate plants are, at best, temporary indoor guests. The occasional temperate climate plant that does survive indoors either can tolerate an unusually wide temperature range or can thrive indoors temporarily while in flower or in fruit.

If you eliminate plants with temperate climate origins from the list of potential houseplants, you still have a universe of possibilities. More than 90 percent of the world's 300,000 plant species originated in tropical or subtropical regions, so you're looking at hundreds of thousands of potential houseplant choices.

Oh, So That's a Houseplant

What makes a houseplant different from other plants? Most people would say that a houseplant is one that's planted in a pot. All houseplants *do* grow in some kind of container but dozens of strictly outdoor plants (for example, trees lining urban boulevards) also spend their entire lives in containers.

The dictionary will tell you that a houseplant is defined by *where* it lives — pick any plant that's grown indoors for an extended length of time (say, most of the year) and you've got yourself a houseplant. However, many houseplants spend their entire lives inside a covered structure other than someone's house (a nursery or greenhouse, for instance).

Some plants that people typically think of as houseplants actually spend much of the year outdoors and live indoors only in the colder months. Do they really qualify as houseplants? Sure — growing indoors is an essential part of their growth cycle.

It may be easier to define what a houseplant is by identifying those plants that have come by custom and tradition to be the plants we like to have in our homes. Many plants have developed into houseplants because they are relatively easy to grow, provide a touch of colorful decor, aren't too huge (or can be easily pruned down to size), and can be successfully grown in a relatively small container.

The list of potential indoor plants is a long one because far more plants can thrive indoors under controlled conditions than outdoors where the weather is unpredictable and sometimes ugly. Any of the following plant categories has houseplant potential:

- ✓ Trees and shrubs
- ✓ Perennials, biennials, and annuals
- ✓ Bulbs
- ✓ Cacti, succulents, and other arid-land residents
- ✓ Climbing and trailing plants
- ✓ Aquatic and semi-aquatic plants
- ✓ Plants grown for foliage or for flowers and fruits
- ✓ Container plants grown outside for the summer and brought indoors for the winter

Identifying the Ideal Houseplant

Having tropical or subtropical origins doesn't always guarantee that a plant is suited to be a domestic specimen. The following features make for the ideal houseplant (if not the ideal roommate):

- ✓ Tolerates dry indoor air
- ✓ Can live indoors for a prolonged period (meaning, at least a year for plants other than those brought in for temporary decoration)
- ✓ Grows relatively fast, yet tops out at ceiling height
- ✓ Easy to multiply (so you can share snips with Aunt Ida)
- ✓ Requires little pruning or pinching
- ✓ Looks good throughout all or most of the year, or goes so thoroughly dormant that you can hide it away in a closet until growing season
- ✓ Resistant to insects and disease
- ✓ Tolerates occasional abuse or neglect (such as your sometimes forgetting to water it, or when Rover's sledgehammer of a tail causes your plant to take a topple)
- ✓ Doesn't require extraordinary conditions for its survival, or if it's grown for its blossoms, doesn't require special conditions in order to flower

After applying the ideal-houseplants criteria, that eliminates a couple hundred thousand candidates in the vegetable kingdom, but leaves tens of thousands of interesting plants to choose from, not counting the hundreds of *hybrids* (man-made plants created by crossing two different plants) that are released annually.

They Get Around: Indoor/Outdoor Plants

Some plants are neither true houseplants nor true garden plants. Plants from this group are traditionally grown in containers, brought indoors during the colder months of the year, and then put back outdoors during warmer weather. Unlike *tender bulbs* (bulbs that can't tolerate hard frost), which spend the winter indoors in a dormant phase, indoor/outdoor plants remain in growth all year and often bloom both indoors or out.

Putting them outside for the summer

When you put indoor/outdoor plants outdoors for the summer, be sure to acclimate them first. Even plants grown directly in front of a sunny south window need time to adjust to direct outdoor sunlight because glass filters most of the UV rays that cause sunburn in both plants and humans. If you abruptly expose indoor plants to direct sun outdoors, they will *burn*.

Start them out in the shade, then move them gradually into brighter and brighter light over a two week period until they can tolerate full sun. Beware, too, of cool nights early in the season: If frost or cold threatens, bring them back indoors for a day or two. You can generally consider moving them outdoors when most nights are above 60°F (15°C).



When you grow potted plants outdoors, they need more attention paid to watering. Wind dries out plants in containers far more quickly than it does plants planted directly in the ground. In hot, dry weather you may need to water container plants as often as twice a day. Container plants also need more fertilizer outdoors than indoors. And keep them out of strong winds that can rip their foliage and knock them over.

To reduce the watering needs of container plants, simply bury the container in the garden! This results in less water loss and, therefore, less frequent waterings.



To keep the pot from becoming stained and the plant's roots from anchoring themselves into the soil (which greatly complicates digging them up again in the fall), just cover the pot with an old nylon stocking. When you need to bring the plants back inside, just dig up the pot and remove the stocking. The pot looks as good as new and no tough roots have wiggled out and anchored the plant into the garden.

Bringing them back indoors during the cold weather months

When temperatures drop again in the autumn, bring them back inside. In fact, most plants adapt better to the transition if you bring them back indoors *before* temperatures start to drop.

Before bringing them inside, give them a thorough cleanup. Remove any dead or dying leaves or flowers. Most plants grow during the summer, so you may need to repot them into larger pots with fresh potting mix. Also, prune any plants that have grown too large for your home environment (see Chapter 15 for pruning methods).

Spray all plants thoroughly with soap and water or an appropriate insecticide to help eliminate foliage insects before you bring the plants indoors. Then soak the entire root ball in a pail full of insecticidal soap, diluted to one-fifth the usual concentration (add one-fifth the amount soap or five times more water). Let it soak for two to three hours to eliminate any soil insects. These two insect control treatments work about 90 percent of the time, but to make sure that you account for the one in ten times that these methods don't catch all the foliage insects, always put the plants in quarantine for at least 40 days before putting them near your other houseplants.

Some popular indoor/outdoor plants

Gardeners commonly grow the following plants as container plants for both indoor and outdoor use. Some of the following plants are described in more detail in Chapter 5.

- ✓ Azalea (*Rhododendron simsii*)
- ✓ Bedding begonia (*Begonia* × *semperflorens-cultorum*)
- ✓ Bird of paradise (*Strelitzia regina*)
- ✓ Blue marguerite (*Felicia amelloides*)
- ✓ Browallia (*Browallia speciosa*)
- ✓ Coleus (*Coleus* × *hybridus* or *Solenostemon scutellarioides*)
- ✓ Dipladenia (*Mandevilla*)
- ✓ Fountain dracaena (*Cordyline australis* or *Cordyline indivisa*)
- ✓ Fuchsia (*Fuchsia* and cultivars)
- ✓ Geranium (*Pelargonium hortorum* and *P. peltatum*)
- ✓ Heliotrope (*Heliotropium arborescens*)
- ✓ Impatiens (*Impatiens wallerana* and *I.* × *hawkeri*)

- ✓ Madagascar periwinkle (*Catharanthus roseus*)
- ✓ Marguerite (*Arygyranthemum frutescens*)
- ✓ Miniature rose (*Rosa* and cultivars)
- ✓ Oleander (*Nerium oleander*)
- ✓ Osteospermum (*Osteospermum barberae*)
- ✓ Polka-dot plant (*Hypoestes phyllostachya*)
- ✓ Potato vine (*Solanum jasminoides*)
- ✓ Scented geranium (*Pelargonium graveolens*)
- ✓ Transvaal daisy (*Gerbera jamesonii*)
- ✓ Winged pea (*Lotus berthelotii*)

Close, But No Cultivar

Some plants spend at least part of the year indoors but for one reason or another are *not* generally considered houseplants. For example, consider the following:

- ✓ **Tender bulbs (dahlias, cannas, gladiolus) brought indoors for the winter in colder climes.** You don't usually grow these flowering bulbs indoors; they just spend their dormant period in the house. Therefore, they don't really count as houseplants.
- ✓ **Annuals and vegetables started indoors from seeds.** These temporary indoor residents simply get their head start on the growing season by sprouting indoors, but actually finish their lives as strictly outdoor plants.
- ✓ **Plants on temporary indoor display.** You can bring an outdoor bonsai or hanging basket inside for a special occasion, but if you put it right back outside after your company leaves, it's not a houseplant.
- ✓ **Cut flowers.** The ultimate in temporary indoor residents, cut flowers aren't rooted and, therefore, don't really grow indoors. Technically speaking, they are plants, but are they houseplants? Nope.
- ✓ **Artificial plants.** No matter how good they look (plastic and silk plants are becoming more and more life-like all the time), they just ain't plants. You bought a book called *Houseplants For Dummies*, so I'm betting you want to try your hand at cultivating something that's alive. Leave plastic plants to collect dust and pollute the air — yep, they actually give off toxic substances, which makes them far inferior to live plants that filter the air and make it easier to breathe. When you have a choice, always go for living plants, all the time, everywhere.