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- » Exploring this awesome group of plants
- » Deciding whether houseplants are right for you
- » Knowing what to do for your houseplants each month of the year

Chapter **1**

Discovering the World of Houseplants

You're about to encounter a marvelous category of plants called *houseplants*, and you're in store for an exciting adventure! Houseplants hail from all over the world — from moist rainforests to bone-dry deserts. Within this group are plants that grow in the dense shade of tropical jungles and plants that thrive in the blinding bright light of full sun. Some can get several feet tall, whereas others are miniatures that can fit in a teacup. They display every conceivable leaf shape, texture, color, flower size, and color palette.

In this chapter, I introduce you to this amazing group of plants. First, I cover what's behind the naming of houseplants. Then I share some of the benefits of growing plants in your home before I wrap up the chapter by giving you an overview of what you can expect to happen with your plants during each month of the year.

Getting to Know Houseplants

One of the most intimidating hurdles that beginning houseplant growers face is interpreting the complex names of plants. Although some houseplants have a regularly used common name, many do not, and when you realize what an

immense group of plants this is, you may understand why many plants are referred to by their Latin or Greek name. In this book, I always use the Latin name because that's the universally accepted name, but I add a common name when there is one.

I know the Latin and Greek names can be a bit daunting — so much so that you may wish the scientific terms had died with those long-ago cultures. But there's a benefit to using Latin and Greek for the natural-science world — those languages aren't changing! You'll start to make friends with Latin and Greek as their use becomes more familiar and comfortable to you.



TIP

Pronouncing a plant's name a little at a time makes it easier to say and understand. In the following sections, I share the names, one word at a time, of a species plant and then a hybrid.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Unfortunately, even though Latin and Greek may not be changing, plant names can change as botanists discover that certain houseplants were originally incorrectly assigned a name, or they need new names because they find that houseplants they thought were closely related aren't related. Also, botanists from different countries don't always agree on a name. Still, they tend to follow specific naming guidelines called the International Code of Botanical Nomenclature formulated by the International Botanical Congress. The World Checklist of Selected Plant Families is also a standard reference.



REMEMBER

It can be confusing and even aggravating when a plant name changes. In this book, I use the most recent name (*nomenclature*) for houseplants, but you can be sure some names will change — and may even have changed between the time I wrote this and when you read the book.

Houseplant history

The timeline of houseplant history is difficult to nail down. Certainly, growing food crops took priority in the early parts of human history. Most of the “houseplants” in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome were container plants grown both inside and outside people's dwellings. Examples include citrus, fig, and other fruit trees; roses; vegetables; and various flowering annuals and perennials. And Asians have long treasured plants. A Chinese poem, “The Lonely Orchid,” written by Su Shih in the 11th century, expounds on the fragrance of a potted orchid.

Almost all houseplants hail from the tropical or semitropical parts of the world. Exploration during the Victorian era resulted in plants being brought back from these areas. The invention of *Wardian cases* (which are essentially *terrariums*, or glass containers for growing plants) made the process of bringing back plants from faraway places much more viable and successful because these cases offered

protection from salt mist on the returning ships and provided needed humidity and moisture. The landed gentry of England and parts of Europe purchased the plants at auction houses for display in their impressive greenhouses and orangeries. Ferns and other foliage plants lushly decorated home conservatories or sunrooms and became a desirable addition to any respectable estate.

As homes throughout the world became centrally heated and the installation of glass windows let in more bright light, houseplants were offered a more hospitable indoor habitat. A reawakening of interest in the natural world occurred during the 1960s and '70s. As this interest grew, a larger variety of potted houseplants adapted to the indoor environment became available. Houseplants became a standard feature in home design magazines.

Houseplants have never been more popular than they are now. Their rise in popularity among all age groups of gardeners seems to have accelerated in the 2020s. Interestingly, the advent of COVID-19 played a part in this resurgence because as folks spent much more time in their homes, they wanted to add the beauty and comfort of plants to their living spaces. “Plants, the new pets” became a trend, particularly for millennials working from their houses or small apartments. As a result, the number of houseplants available increased dramatically. Today, the selection of houseplants in almost all houseplant buying venues — from grocery stores, garden centers, and home stores to mail-order and online suppliers — is unparalleled. What a great time to grow houseplants!

Species houseplant names

Plants that are sold as they were created by nature (“from the wild”) rather than hybridized by humans are referred to as *species plants*. They usually have two names, but sometimes they have three:



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- » **Genus name:** This name comes first and is capitalized. (Note that the plural of genus is *genera*.)
- » **Species name:** It comes second and is lowercase.
Both names are in Latin or Greek, and they're italicized.
- » **Botanical variety or form:** This is a third part of the name that comes after the species name. For example, an orchid that varies from the standard species — maybe it has a larger flower or a slightly different coloration — has a third component in its name, preceded by *var*. This part of the name is lowercase and in Latin. If the variety is specified as a “form,” it has a lowercase *f* after the species name followed by the form name in lowercase and Latin. Botanical “form” is one step of specification beyond “variety.”



TIP

The genus name is much like a person’s family name, and the species name is like your given name. In other words, if my name were written the way a plant’s is, I would be *Frowine steven*.

Here’s an example of the complete name of a botanical variety of a houseplant: *Ananas comosus* var. *variegatus* (common name: variegated pineapple). Table 1-1 explains the plant’s name.

TABLE 1-1 The Components of a Species Houseplant Name

Part of Name	Name	Explanation
Genus name	<i>Ananas</i>	The first name of a houseplant is the genus and is like your family (last) name. It’s always capitalized, italicized, and in Latin.
Species name	<i>comosus</i>	The second name of a houseplant is the species. It’s always lowercase, italicized, and in Latin.
Botanical variety	var. <i>variegatus</i>	Sometimes, there’s a third name. This is called the <i>botanical variety</i> , which means this example of the species has something special about it (for example, flower shape or color) that separates it from the more usual form of the species. This name is lowercase, italicized, and in Latin or Greek.

Here’s an example of a form of a bromeliad plant: *Neoregelia carolinae* f. *tricolor* (common name: blushing bromeliad).

Cultivar names

When a particular selection of a plant shows some characteristic that’s different or exceptional from the standard plant of its type, it’s given a cultivar name. (*Cultivar* is an abbreviation of *cultivated variety*.) This name is always capitalized, is set off by single quotation marks, and is not in Latin or Greek (it’s usually English) — for example, *Aloe arboretum* ‘Electra’.

Aeonium arboretum ‘Black Rose’

Hybrid plant names

Eventually, humans got mixed up in the plant world and started developing *hybrids*, which are the result of *crossing* two species (taking the pollen from one

species of plant to mate it with another). Hybrids of most houseplants usually contain two names: the genus and the hybrid name or cultivar name (the *cultivated horticultural hybrid name*). An example of a cultivar of a hybrid is *Aloe* 'Blue Elf'.

Orchid names are another kettle of fish compared to other houseplant names. Orchids' names, especially the hybrids, can be much more complex. This is due to the exceptional ability of orchids to be bred between two or more different genera. Most hybrids are a result of orchid breeders purposely breeding one or more genera together to create a unique new orchid that has some of the characteristics of each parent. As you can imagine, this makes orchid hybrid names quite complex.



For most of the plants in this book, I list only the genus and species. I don't mention hybrids of these plants because specific hybrids may be much harder to find where you shop for plants.

Understanding the Benefits of Growing Houseplants

Growing and studying houseplants provides the ultimate horticultural experience and pleasure. Here are some key reasons to start growing houseplants now:

- » Growing houseplants is fun and relaxing! (That may be the most important motive for working on your green thumb.)
- » You don't need to be an expert. Houseplants are easy to grow. See Part 2 for information on how to be successful.
- » You can start with beginner houseplants that can make any newcomer wildly successful. See Part 3 for a description of great plants to start off growing.
- » There has never been a wider choice of houseplants, and you can easily find the one that's right for you. See Chapter 2 to make this process a snap.
- » Some plants emit exquisite perfumes. I will mention in the text if a particular plant has an especially pleasing scent.
- » Plants don't need to be expensive; most are reasonably priced. Many cost less than a flower arrangement, and they last longer!

SELECTING THE PLANTS THAT WILL DO BEST IN YOUR HOME

Choosing a houseplant is an exciting, but sometimes confusing, decision! So many types of houseplants, so little space. In this book, I make the selection process easy for you:

- Check out Chapter 2 to walk through some of the steps for deciding which houseplant fits your home environment and to find suggestions about where you can purchase them.
- Consider starting your houseplant collection with the easiest houseplants. They're the most foolproof of all. See Chapter 16 for suggestions.
- When you're ready to expand your collection or you want more choices, check out all the other houseplants in Part 3.

- » Houseplants are available from big-box stores, specialty growers, flower shows, garden centers, botanical gardens, houseplant societies, and online or mail-order suppliers. These outlets have large selections, which was unheard of a decade ago.
- » Because of the huge diversity of houseplants, you'll never tire of them. You'll always find new ones to try and enjoy. Check out the chapters in Part 3 for some of the many possibilities.
- » If you join one of the houseplant societies mentioned in the appendix, you'll meet new friends who are as fanatical about plants as you are. The societies' magazines and online information are marvelous sources for information and gorgeous pictures.
- » Houseplants don't have to be grown in an expensive greenhouse. They'll be happy with a windowsill or artificial lights. See Chapter 5 for the skinny on how to grow houseplants to perfection in your home.
- » Plants beautify your home and life. See Chapter 4 for some tips on how to enjoy them to the fullest in your home.
- » Houseplants can live a very long time — even decades. In fact, they get bigger and better every year that you have them.
- » As they grow, you can divide and multiply them to share with your friends or to trade for other houseplants. See Chapter 8 for more tips on dividing and multiplying your houseplants.

Growing Houseplants: A Month-by-Month Guide

To be generally successful in growing houseplants, just follow these suggestions:

- » Know the environment you have to offer your houseplants and find houseplants that fit into it. See Chapter 5 for more information on your growing environment.
- » If necessary, modify your growing area to help your houseplants perform at their best. Chapter 5 also addresses this.

For the most common houseplant questions and problems, check out Part 4.

Beyond choosing the right houseplant for your environment, you must pay attention to the time of the year to know what your houseplant needs. In the following sections, I give you a month-by-month rundown of the calendar year with suggestions of what you may need to do during each month.

Note: You can't be too exact with the timing of this care schedule because the United States is a vast country with climates ranging from the cold north to the semitropics. The guidelines in this book are for the United States and other countries in the Northern Hemisphere. If you live in the Southern Hemisphere, take that into consideration. For example, January in the Northern Hemisphere corresponds to July in the Southern Hemisphere, and so on.

January

This is a period of cold, short days and low light, so houseplants don't grow much. Fortunately, some houseplants are budding up and getting ready to show off their splendid blooms very soon. Consider the following:

- » For houseplants such as some of the cacti and succulents, this is a time of rest, so you'll want to reduce your watering.
- » Some of your potted "forced" spring bulbs like daffodils, crocus, tulips, and hyacinths should be rooted well enough to be brought in from their outdoor cold area.

If you haven't already done so, you can pot your amaryllis bulbs.

- » Watch out for bugs. Check the underside of the leaves of all your plants and treat them right away if you see any signs of problems. See Chapter 9 for more information.



TIP

- » Keep the humidity moderate (40 to 50 percent) with good air movement. See Chapter 5 for ways to do this.
- » If you're watering with well water, warm it to room temperature before using it on your houseplants. Ice-cold water can cause forming buds to drop and may stunt new growth. This is especially true for plants with hairy foliage because cold (or sometimes hot) water spots the leaves.
- » Don't put your houseplants too close to the windows because the leaves can be damaged by the cold. Thermopane windows reduce the chance of such damage.
- » Apply little fertilizer. Houseplants don't need it yet. In fact, if you apply too much fertilizer at this time, the excess salts in the unused fertilizer can damage plant roots.
- » When you water your plants, do it in the early morning so the foliage dries off before evening. Water remaining on foliage on cool evenings invites disease problems.
- » Make sure very sensitive plants like African violets and moth orchids don't get too cold. Put a maximum/minimum thermometer in your growing area to monitor your minimum temperatures.
- » Consider having an artificial light growing area, so you can enjoy growing your plants when windowsill plants have pretty much shut down. This setup also can spare your plants from light-deficiency disorder.

February

This is another dark month, but the days are getting longer and brighter, which should cause an increase in growth. Keep the following in mind:

- » Toward the end of this month, increased light may mean you have to be careful with your houseplants that require less light, so they don't get burned. You may have to move them farther away from the windows or install a light-reducing curtain.
- » Spend some enjoyable downtime looking at catalogs and online houseplant suppliers to dream about what you can add to your collection, but don't order houseplants for mail delivery until it warms up in the spring. Otherwise, you run a high risk of cold damage to your houseplants during transit.
- » More of your houseplants that are naturally winter blooming will be showing buds, and some may be blooming — especially bulbs like amaryllis and some orchids.

- » Don't overcrowd your plants. This can create poor air circulation, which leads to poor growth and disease problems.
- » Make sure your plants receive as much light as possible without overdoing it.
- » You can sow seeds of slow-growing annuals, like coleus and impatiens, that you want to grow indoors.
- » Tubers of tuberous begonias and gloxinias can be potted at the end of this month.
- » Tall-growing flower spikes like ones on amaryllis and some orchids need to be staked. Be careful when inserting the stakes not to spear the bulb or penetrate any of the main roots.
- » If you're growing under lights, take note of when you last changed your bulbs. Fluorescent lamps (the tubes in fluorescent lights are commonly called lamps) can lose up to 40 percent of their light output after several months of use. Because new growth is starting on houseplants, this is a good time to change the lamps so the plants will receive the most light possible. LEDs generally produce their full amount of light for a longer time than fluorescent lamps. For much more detail on artificial lights check out Chapter 5.
- » Apply very little fertilizer during this month. Wait until you see new growth.

March

Finally, signs of spring arrive with longer and brighter days. Most houseplants respond very favorably to the increased light and warmth of this month. Here are some guidelines for March:

- » Be careful that the increased sunlight doesn't heat your greenhouse or windowsill too much. Apply shading if necessary. See Chapter 5 for various shade-providing options and ideas.
- » The increased light and warmth of this month means an acceleration of growth. Sprouting new shoots should be more evident.
- » This is the beginning of the show for many houseplants. Many orchids and other houseplants will be starting to bloom.
- » As the days get brighter and warmer, resume your regular fertilizing schedule.
- » March and April are usually prime times to check out flower shows in your area. They're inspiring and fun, and shows are a good place to buy a few new houseplants and related supplies.

- » More light in this month means more active growth. If you're growing plants in a windowsill that has light coming from one direction, their growth may lean or elongate. Prevent this by turning your plants a quarter turn every few days so they grow more uniformly.

April

In April, many houseplants start to flower. You'll notice increased growth and new roots and foliage as spring charges full steam ahead. You'll be busy tending your houseplants. Remember the following:

- » Many houseplants showing new growth can be repotted at this time. See Chapter 7.
- » Sometimes during the low-light periods of winter, plants become stretched or "leggy." This is a good time to trim them back to encourage fuller and bushier growth.
- » Be on the lookout for bugs. The warmer temperatures cause them to hatch.
- » Houseplants that seem to have stopped growing during the dark of the winter should be showing new growth, so resume your regular watering and fertilizing schedule.
- » If you didn't apply shading on your greenhouse last month, your plants may need it this month.
- » A gauze curtain may be needed to soften the light for houseplants growing in a south window.
- » Start summer flowering bulbs that like warmer weather, like caladiums, cannas, and callas.
- » If some of your light-sensitive plants, like African violets, have spent the low-light winter days in a southern exposure, move them to an east window to avoid sunburned leaves.
- » Try not to be too eager to move your tropical plants outdoors until you're sure there are no more chances of frost.

May

Rapid growth continues at full bore this month as days get brighter and longer. May is another prime month for houseplant flowering and another active month for you, their caretaker. Here are some tasks that need your attention:



WARNING

- » More frequent watering and fertilizing is needed. More details and guidance in Chapter 6.
- » If you're in a northern climate, move some plants to a protected shaded spot outdoors by the end of this month, but be careful not to do this too soon. Houseplants that prefer it warm and don't appreciate being too chilled at night — they don't like temperatures below around 55°F (13°C).
- » Increase your ventilation to remove excess hot air and prevent fungal disease spotting on flowers.
- » May is usually an opportune time to repot your houseplants because they should be in active growth. Attend to this right after they've flowered; repotting when they're flowering is stressful for them.
- » Take your houseplants outdoors for a close inspection. Check for bugs or disease problems. It's easier to apply whatever remedies are necessary outdoors rather than in your house. Remove all dead leaves while you have your plants outside.

Some houseplants do not do well outdoors. This applies to delicate plants and plants with hairy leaves like gloxinias and African violets. Their foliage easily burns from too much light and becomes spotted from rains.

June, July, and August

Temperatures have heated up. Some houseplants, like a few of the summer-blooming hybrid cattleya orchids, moth orchids, oncidium orchids, and slipper orchids, are in flower. These months aren't usually noted for a lot of houseplant flowering, but they're a time when your plants produce many roots and leaves to build up energy for future blooming so pay attention to them in the following ways:

- » Be sure your windowsill or greenhouse doesn't get too hot. Consider moving houseplants from a south window to an east window, where they'll appreciate the reduced light and heat.
- » For houseplants growing under lights, make sure your growing area gets plenty of ventilation because it may be getting very warm. If you have trouble keeping the temperature low enough, consider summering your houseplants outside in a protected shaded spot. They'll enjoy the vacation.
- » For light gardeners, this is a good time to clean and sanitize your growing area. Also consider replacing some of your fluorescent bulbs, especially ones showing dark bands at both ends of the tubes, which indicates they're starting to fail.



TIP

» If you plan to take a vacation, be sure to line up a dependable plant sitter. This is a serious and important job. Take time to show your plant sitter exactly how often and how much each plant should be watered. I've discovered from personal experience that a week of improper watering (usually too much) can do serious damage to your plants. Using self-watering pots can make this job easier for a plant sitter, and the plants can go longer between waterings. For more information on self-watering pots check out Chapter 6.

» This is also a prime time for insect problems. If it gets hot and dry, be on the lookout for mites. If it's wet, slugs and snails can be a plague. Aphids, mealybugs, and scale can show up anytime. If you need to spray, do it in the morning when it's cool and be sure your houseplants are well watered before you spray. Check out Chapter 9 for more information on how to handle common bug problems.

» Your houseplants should be responding to your earlier repotting efforts with new root growth.



WARNING

» If you put some of your container houseplants outdoors, make sure they don't receive too much light, or the leaves can burn. Also realize that hot days can dry out your plants very quickly. Check them daily.

» Even if some of your plants don't seem too big for their pots, summer is a good time to repot them if the potting media is older than a year or so. Older media breaks down and can lose its ability to drain well. See Chapter 7 for tips on repotting.



TIP

If you have pots that you want to reuse, this is a good time to wash and store them. Soaking them overnight in a solution of one part bleach and nine parts water removes algae, disease organisms, insects and their eggs, and crusting from minerals. You can also put clay or ceramic pots (not plastic — they may melt) in the dishwasher on the hot or pot cycle.

» Potted indoor cacti and succulents may be moved outdoors for the summer months, after all danger of frost has passed. They may appreciate some sheltered shade at first, especially during the hottest part of the afternoon.

September

Cool evenings and shorter days are signs of the change in season. The cooler nights are beneficial for initiating or setting flower buds for fall-blooming and winter-blooming houseplants. Here are some other things to be aware of during this month:

» If you're in a cold climate, bring in any plants that have been summering outside. Before doing so, check them closely for pests. If spraying is called for, it's much easier and safer to do while the plants are outdoors.



REMEMBER

- » Start cutting back on the frequency of watering *deciduous* houseplants (plants that shed their leaves) like catasetum orchids (which have yellowing foliage at this time of year).

It's normal for houseplants to lose some of their lower leaves after they are brought indoors. This is just a response to being moved from the humid, bright outdoors to a drier, lower-light area. Don't be concerned unless this leaf drop continues for a month or so. If this happens, it may be a result of overwatering.

- » Remove the shades on your greenhouse in most parts of the Northern Hemisphere.
- » If you would like to try forcing some spring bulbs for winter flowering indoors, this is the time to pot them.
- » Before it frosts, take cuttings of outdoor plants you want to grow during the winter or hold onto for the next gardening season. Coleus and geraniums are some examples. See Chapter 8 for information about taking cuttings from plants.
- » Peak houseplant season is around the corner, so stock up on growing supplies.
- » Move houseplants that require a lot of light from the east window back to a southern exposure.

October

Do the following for your houseplants, no matter whether you're growing them in a greenhouse, under lights, or on the windowsill:

- » As the days continue to shorten and the angle of light gets lower in the sky, position the houseplants in your windowsill and greenhouse so that they capture the most light.
- » Be sure your glass or glazing surface is clean. This can make a real difference in light transmission.
- » If you're growing under fluorescent or LED lights, clean the tubes or diodes with a damp cloth to remove any spray residue or water deposits that reduce their intensity.
- » Lower temperatures and less light cause growth to slow on many houseplants, so reduce watering and fertilizing accordingly. See Chapter 5 for more details about desirable plant-growing temperatures.
- » Get ready for winter. Insulate your greenhouse, and get a standby emergency propane heater.

November and December

Flowering spikes show up on some moth orchids, slipper orchids, and oncidium orchids. Some of the nobile-type dendrobium orchids start to show buds. The low light, short days, and cold temperatures of these two months bring most houseplant growth to a stop or at least a crawl. Plants grown under lights have more growth than plants in a greenhouse or on a windowsill because of the additional light that can be provided. Here are tasks to complete:

- » For the Northern Hemisphere and other cold parts of the world, November is the last month to safely purchase mail-order plants before it gets so cold that there's a higher risk of freeze damage in transit. Visit houseplant nurseries to pick out holiday presents for your houseplant-growing friends (or yourself!).
- » Put houseplants that require more light, like most cacti and succulents, in a bright window, close to the lights, or high in the greenhouse to expose them to as much light as possible.
- » If you want to keep poinsettias, Christmas cacti, amaryllis, or freesia in great condition, keep them in a cool, bright room (at least four hours of sunlight is ideal), and don't forget to water them as needed.
- » Clean off your plants' leaves with a soft damp cloth to increase their ability to absorb the lower light during this time of the year. If you want to add a natural luster to the leaves, wipe them down with milk. Whole milk works best because of the fat content.
- » Water plants in the early part of the day to ensure that no standing moisture is on the leaves overnight. In cold, damp weather especially, excess moisture can cause disease outbreaks.