

Houseplants spread cheer during winter drear

by John O'Connell

In these gray days of winter, indoor plants can brighten our homes and lift our spirits.

"When the Christmas decorations are put away, a home can look pretty colorless," said Lisa Hoerr-Grandstaff of Green View Nursery, a Midwest chain of six retail nurseries. "You look outside and everything is brown and lifeless. Houseplants bring life and something green indoors."

Florists and garden centers offer a wide variety of indoor plants. Some of the most common are African violets, amaryllis, paperwhites, poinsettias, coleus, ivy and philodendrons. In addition to making a home more attractive and adding a design touch, houseplants can increase humidity and clean the air of pollution.

THE RIGHT LIGHT

"The amount of light in a home determines which houseplants will do best," said David Ploussard, a registered landscape architect and horticulturist at D.A. Hoerr & Sons Inc. in Peoria, Ill.

"Some houseplants will do well in low light, while others require much more light."

COLORFUL PLANT - African violets are among the most common indoor plants to brighten the home in winter. CNS Photo by David Zentz. Lighting can vary from room to room. Rooms with south-facing windows will receive the most sunlight. Rooms with west-facing windows and east-facing windows receive moderate lighting throughout the day, while those with north-facing windows receive little light and almost no direct sunlight.

"If you are looking for a pizzazz of color, most indoor plants don't flower all the time," Ploussard said. "Indoor plants are typically short-term bloomers. But poinsettias with the proper care can provide color from December to May. They are among the most popular indoor plants."

Poinsettias can look especially attractive grouped together.

SUCCULENTS, CACTI AND OTHERS

Green View horticulturist Beth Haag said succulents and cacti are ideal indoor plants that will live a long time with very little care. Their texture and sculptural form complement a variety of home decors.

"Succulents and cacti are great for individuals who have had bad experiences growing houseplants," Hoerr-Grandstaff said. "They are very hardy plants."

Forced bulbs, such as amaryllis and paperwhites, provide spring color in winter. Paperwhites, Haag said, can be forced to bloom up to six weeks indoors. They have delicate blooms of lacy white.

"Paperwhites are very easy to care for," she said. "Their bulbs can be potted in lava rock or even in glass beads with some water."

Amaryllis is another undemanding indoor blooming plant. It produces large, lily-like blooms with colors varying from red, pink, white, yellow and mixed.

"One of my favorite indoor plants is Norfolk Island Pine," Haag said. "I put Christmas lights on it during the holidays. It's a great houseplant."

Norfolk Island Pines may reach a height of 80 feet in their natural habitat, but they maintain a reasonable size when grown in a container in the home. This houseplant has soft textured foliage. Another of Haag's favorites is the Chinese evergreen, a houseplant grown for its ornamental green foliage. It can thrive in low light.

For beginners, there is no better houseplant than the peace lily, according to Ploussard.

"My father has one, and it thrives in very low light," he said. "Peace lilies are not fussy. They don't require a lot of care."

The peace lily has many dark green, sword-shaped leaves that grow out from the soil. It occasionally produces white flowers.

A large number of herbs also can be grown inside as houseplants. Rosemary, lavender, sage and thyme are especially good for indoor use.

Many orchids are winter bloomers, which make them ideal houseplants. They form gorgeous flowers and evoke a sense of good taste.

"Orchids carry a stigma of being very fussy plants," Hoerr-Grandstaff said. "In reality, they are not. Orchids thrive on benign neglect. You hurt them by overdoing - by watering and fertilizing too much."

Beginning orchid growers might want to start with a phalaenopsis, Haag advised. It's a beautiful orchid and one of the easiest to grow. It can bloom from three weeks up to a couple of months.

REMOVING POLLUTANTS

In addition to their aesthetic appeal, houseplants are efficient at filtering dangerous indoor pollutants out of the air, according to studies by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

The right plants in the right place can reduce indoor air pollutants by as much as 87 percent, according to the Illinois Landscape Contractors Association.

"Plants that are most effective at filtering indoor air are Aglaonema (Chinese evergreen), Spathiphyllum (peace lily), Syngonium (arrowhead vine), Hedera (English ivy), Dracaena (cornplant) and Scindapsus (Devil's ivy)," an ILCA representative said.

"Flowering plants such as mums, azaleas, gerbera daisies, cyclamen and even tulips help clean the air for short periods of time. Philodendrons and spider plants were found to be the most efficient in the removal of formaldehyde. Gerbera daisies and chrysanthemums were found to be effective in the removal of benzene, a known carcinogen."

The most recent study found that plants do little, if anything, to filter tobacco smoke.

CARE OF HOUSEPLANTS

The biggest mistake gardeners make when caring for houseplants is overwatering, Ploussard said.

"We have people who bring their sick plants to our garden center," the D.A. Hoerr horticulturist said. "Overwatering is invariably the problem. Plants may require anywhere from a mist to a strong drink of water. It varies from plant to plant."

When watering plants, don't use tap water connected to a water softener, Ploussard warned. There is too much salt in it. If you have a water softener, get water from an outside faucet, use bottled water or capture rainwater.

Most plants you buy will have tags telling you how to maintain them.

"It will tell you the amount of light it requires, the right temperature and the amount of fertilizer and water to give it," he said. "If you are a good gardener, you will get to know what each of your houseplants need or they may quickly perish."

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