

# The JOY of Houseplants

"Remember they are to be enjoyed, not agonized over.

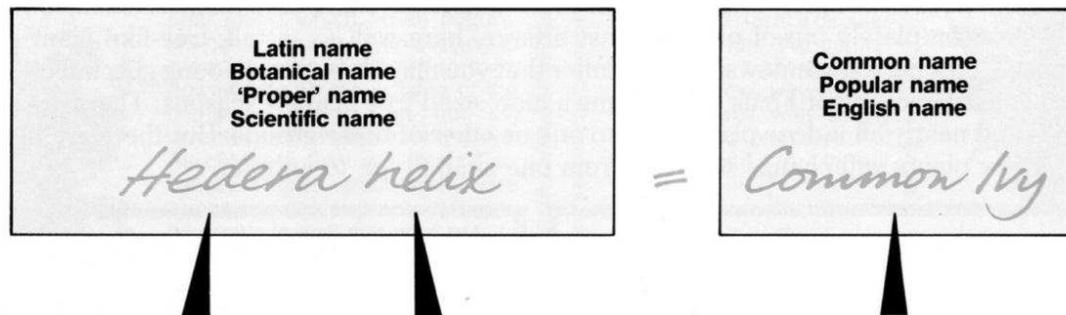
Throw out what does not thrive:

Cherish what responds to your interested attention."

---from 'Houseplants Are For Pleasure' by Helen Van Pelt Wilson

Houseplants are classified in the scientific world by the arrangement of their blossoms and seed pods. For practical purposes, houseplants are grouped in the 'real world' by their use. The most common types are: foliage plants, blooming plants, and blooming pot plants. Less common types include cactus, bulbs, edibles, and overwintered container plants.

## THE NAMING OF HOUSE PLANTS



Name of **genus**:  
This is equivalent  
to a surname

Name of **species**:  
This is equivalent  
to a Christian name

Only one type of plant can have this name. Once the full latin name has been used on a page, a nearby reference is abbreviated.

For example: H. helix

A species such as H. helix may have several closely-related varieties. The **variety** name is usually in latin.

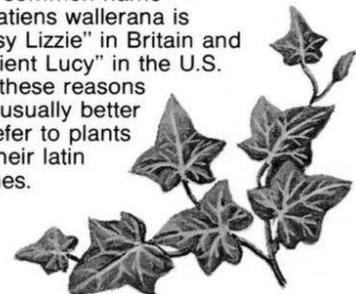
For example: H. helix cristata  
H. helix scutifolia

If the variety originated in cultivation and not in the wild then it is called a **cultivar** (short for "cultivated variety"). The cultivar name is usually not in latin.

For example: H. helix Chicago  
H. helix Little Eva

One genus or several genera which have a basically similar floral pattern make up a **family**. Hedera, Fatsia, Dizygotheca and Schefflera all belong to the Araliaceae or Ivy family.

A number of different plants can have the same common name. For example, both Zebrina pendula and Tradescantia fluminensis are popularly known as "Wandering Jew". On the other hand a single species may have more than one common name — Impatiens wallerana is "Busy Lizzie" in Britain and "Patient Lucy" in the U.S. For these reasons it is usually better to refer to plants by their latin names.



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Illustration from The House Plant Expert by Dr. D. G. Hessayon, 2001 Ed.

## Know What You Grow

*The most important step to keeping your houseplants happy is knowing their names!*

Identifying your plants is the first step to getting pleasure from keeping houseplants. It will insure they are healthy and beautiful, and also make your life easier! Many species look alike but require much different care. A houseplant will be a part of your home, a part of your life, and can either cause headaches or give joy. Like any friendship, learning a plant's name as well as likes and dislikes is the only way to start a rewarding relationship.

A label is a place to begin, but don't take it as the 'whole truth'! Look at the overall shape and growth habit of the plant. Look at the leaf shape, thickness and color. Buy or check out MORE THAN ONE houseplant book. This can be a very enjoyable part of your houseplant hobby.

# How Plants Work

Working in vegetable gardens and annual or perennial flower beds, we have gained valuable knowledge of how plants live, grow and die. However, neglecting the basic elements of plant growth remains the cause of most houseplant problems.

## Plant Food

Plants need carbon dioxide, water and light. Photosynthesis is the process that converts these three elements into glucose and oxygen. This glucose is the source of carbohydrates which make up all living cells. This is the only real 'plant food'. It can be thought of in much the same manner as our food: sugars, starches, fats, proteins, etc. These are also used by plants. And none of them can be given directly as plant 'fertilizer'.

## Nutrients

Plants do need 14 mineral nutrients to carry out photosynthesis, to regulate plant growth, to initiate bloom, etc. Nutrients needed in large amounts, such as nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), potassium (K) are macronutrients. Micronutrients are needed in smaller amounts and include calcium, magnesium, sulfur, boron, zinc, and others. These nutrients may be supplied by organic and chemical 'fertilizers'.

## Botany --- 'Simplified, In My Words'

Grade-school science class taught plant stems function like 'straws': drawing water up from the roots and returning by-products of photosynthesis from the leaves. Picture a bundle of small straws in the center of each stem, surrounded by several rows of smaller straws.

Water flows into the roots and up through the center bundle of 'straws' toward the surface of the leaves. The surface of the leaves is covered with small openings, called stoma, through which air enters. Carbon dioxide and water, combined with the light energy entering the leaf, manufactures glucose and oxygen.

Oxygen, with a small amount of water, exits the stoma on the leaf surface, and is called respiration. The glucose is dissolved by enzymes and flows into the outer rows of 'straws' and travels to the buds, flowers, roots, and all parts of the plant. This 'plant food' is used by cells, for elongation (stems and roots), initiation (blossoms), and adaption (branching).

**SUMMARY:** Water flows upward from the roots through the plant to the leaf surface. Sun, water and air react to produce glucose and oxygen. The oxygen leaves the plant and the glucose flows downward through the plant to be used as food by the plant cells.

If any one part of the process is broken or interrupted, plant life processes slow up and will to cease to function. **THE HEALTH OF YOUR PLANT DEPENDS UPON THE CONTINUED FLOW OF WATER UPWARD AND GLUCOSE DOWNWARD.**

One of my favorite books, published in the 50's, states: "We want to encourage roots to grow, because after a spurt of root growth, top grows, then blooming begins." That may sound like 'country wisdom' but is fundamentally correct and worth remembering.

Logee's Greenhouse, one of the oldest US tropical plant greenhouses, has posted an article which states: "We recommend that you simply turn the plant on its side, tap the entire root ball out of the pot and examine the color of the roots. If they are soft, brown and easily fall apart when you touch or pull on them, you can be assured that some or all of the root system has collapsed. If the roots are white or tan colored, succulent when you pull on them and have fleshy white tips, then your root system is healthy. Without robust root development plants can't thrive. Half the secret to growing beautiful specimens is having healthy roots."

# How To Buy A Healthy Plant

As you stand in front of a display of tempting plants, remember: your time and finances are limited, and you expect to have an enjoyable experience when you take home a new plant.

Do these following things without fail, and you and your plant will live happily for a long time. I have discovered, the hard way, that skipping any one of them will lead to hard work and disappointment. You can mix them up; do them in a different order, but do them all.

- ☑ **Identify the plant.** Look at the tag; do the descriptions and photos match the actual plant? You can do this when you get home, but it really should be done before you buy the plant.
- ☑ **Look for culture tips and instructions.** Tags MAY contain correct information, but double check when you get home.
- ☑ **Check for PROBLEMS!** Again, it is much better if you do this before you bring an insect-infested plant into your home and near your other plants!
- ☑ **Don't buy the plant (or accept the gift) if you find insect pests.** This is a hard lesson to learn.

## Poorly Grown Plants

- Roots growing out of pot holes or very few roots at all
- Lower stems bare of leaves
- Evidence of insects

## Well Grown Plants

- Roots filling pot
- Tips showing new growth which may be light green and with smaller leaves
- Leaves present from soil up the plant to tip

## Poorly Cared For Plants

- Roots brown or rusty colored
- Soil has a musty or rotten smell
- Brown edges on leaves
- Few buds beside open blossoms
- Wilting
- Brown or soft leaf stems or plant center

## Well Cared For Plants

- Light colored roots
- Leaves are firm and complete
- Many buds still intact

# It Goes To Jail When You Get Home!

**Inspect** the plant when you get home, before you place it anywhere near your other houseplants. If you see no evidence of pests, you should still **isolate** the new plant for at least four weeks, which is the life cycle of most insect pests. Spraying with an insecticide is a precaution but does not eliminate the need for isolation. 'Plant Jail' is a must!

Repotting into correct soil and pot size does not have to be done immediately, but give it room to breathe and grow, both on your windowsill and in the pot.

**Repotting Tip:** Most plants do NOT like to be 'set deeper'. Keep the soil at the same level on the plant stem as it was in the previous pot. A very few plants can be set deeper in the new pot and soil. If the instructions are not specific, repot with the soil at the same level.

**FACT:** No amount of 'improved' fertilizer or 'enriched' potting mix, can 'heal' a plant that is not receiving the basic elements it needs. These basics are: light, water, soil, temperature, humidity and mineral nutrients. The first three are the most critical and also the easiest to get correct!

## Care For Seasonal and Gift Plants

Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter cactus are actually three different types and are so named due to their tendencies to bloom at these holiday times. The fall and winter blooming species may be identified by the shape of the flat stem segments. In the Thanksgiving cactus, these stem segments have 2 to 4 saw-toothed serrations along the edge. The stem margins on the Christmas cactus are more rounded. A second method of identification is based on the color of the pollen-bearing anthers; the Thanksgiving cactus anthers are yellow, whereas the anthers on the Christmas cactus are purplish-brown.

### **Holiday Cactus Culture:**

Filtered sunshine and temperatures of 70-80 degrees during its growing season of April to September.

- ☑ Cooler temps and more light are needed to initiate bloom. Full sunlight is ideal, but 14 hours or more of continuous darkness each day is required before flower bud set will occur. As little as 2 hours of interrupted lighting will inhibit bud set. Long nights should be started the middle of September and continued for at least 6 continuous weeks for complete bud set. Fall temps should be kept between 60 and 68 degrees. Once buds are set, day and night length has no effect. When flower buds are set do not let temps rise above 85 degrees.
- ☑ Plants grown with night temps between 50 and 59 degrees will set flower buds regardless of day length, but growth and bud formation will be slower.

Water when the soil is dry to the touch. The holiday cacti are tolerant of dry, slightly under-watered conditions during the spring and summer. Never let water stand in the saucer beneath the pot, especially during the dark days of winter.

Fertilizer in the spring and summer. Keep holiday cactus somewhat pot bound. Repotting is necessary only once every three years and is best done in the spring. The potting mix must be well-drained, with good aeration. A good mix may contain 60-80% potting soil with 40-20% perlite.

### **Poinsettia Culture:**

Place your poinsettia where it receives at least 6 hours of bright, indirect sunlight each day. Filter direct sunlight. The daylight temperature should not exceed 70 degrees. Never let the potting mix completely dry out and never let the plant sit in standing water. Do not fertilize when it is in bloom.

- ☑ In March or April, when the colorful bracts fade, prune back to about 8 inches. Keep the plant near a sunny window and continue to water and fertilize regularly.
- ☑ In June, transplant into a container 2 to 4 inches larger. Use a potting mix containing organic matter, such as compost. Pinch back the shoot tips or branches. Do not pinch back after September 1.
- ☑ Starting October 1<sup>st</sup>, keep in total darkness for 14 continuous hours each night. During this period, the plant must also receive six to eight hours of bright sunlight daily. Depending upon the variety, the plant will come into bloom in 8 to 10 weeks.

### **Amaryllis Culture:**

Two types of amaryllis are available. Dutch Hybrids are the most common and take at least 8 to 12 weeks to flower after potting, although there are a few earlier varieties. South African varieties usually flower in 4 to 6 weeks once potted.

Plant in a 'cozy' pot with 25% of the bulb above the soil level. Water moderately. Do not water again until green growth appears. Place them in full sunlight at 72 to 82 degrees.

After blooms fade, fertilize lightly, place in sunlight, and water through mid-July. Then stop watering and store in a dark place. In late October, cut off dead foliage, and water lightly to start the process again.