

Confessions of a Lazy Gardener

Issue #12: House Plants

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Well, here it is winter again -- a time for us lazy folks to take a break and make long lists of things to do next summer. Which probably won't get done, but that's another topic. And, we need to keep our indoor plants alive through the winter.

Many non-lazy gardeners have wonderful indoor gardens. Think of Russ Smith* and his greenhouse full of orchids, or all the great plants in Dave Johnson's* house. Or the many gardeners who propagate impatiens and coleus under lights all winter. I think it's great. But I have no plans to emulate them in the near future.

Here are a few guidelines for the aspiring Lazy Gardener:

1. Don't worry about over-watering. The truly lazy gardener does not water often enough, and has NEVER killed a plant by giving it too much water. So plant selection is important. If something needs to be kept "evenly moist", don't bring it home from the garden store. Why add to the "Houseplants I Have Killed" list?
2. Location is important. If you want to limit the number of indoor plants to have, select a house where all the windows are directly above radiators or furnace vents. That way, plants can either have good light and bake to death, or be comfortably cool and die in the dark.
3. Don't worry about plants getting too big. It probably won't happen. If it does, have your cat or dog knock plants over once in a while, and some of that bothersome extra growth will probably break off. Small children can also assist if needed.
4. Don't be so sure that cacti are the answer. I have several varieties on the aforementioned "Houseplants I Have Killed" list. It should be easy, but there must be more to keeping them alive than it seems. (I'm planning to consult with Ted Olson* one of these days. He has a great cactus collection.)
5. If you're buying new houseplants, accept the fact that they will never again look as good as they did the day they left the store.
6. Think about being cruel and heartless. Throw those old poinsettias out. Don't keep something just because you've had it since you were a sophomore in college.
7. Keep an eye out for insects, especially spider mites. Spider mites seem to enjoy the arid conditions encountered in the Lazy Gardener's houseplant collection. If you find them -- and it isn't already too late -- I advise resorting to foul-smelling insecticides immediately. Yes, I know that many people advocate using sharp streams of water or insecticidal soap to get rid of spider mites, but that requires diligence and perseverance, neither of which are prominent features of my gardening temperament.

8. Fertilizing is something other gardeners do. This requires remembering (1) to buy fertilizer; (2) to use it; (3) how to use it; (4) where you put it. Way too many steps!
9. Repotting is also something that's not done too often. Although it's surprising how well plants will do with a little more room.
10. If at all possible, take all your houseplants outdoors for the summer. They'll do remarkably well in a cool, somewhat shaded area -- much better than in the hot sun indoors.



Despite everything, some things don't die. Here's a list of my houseplants in 2000**, all of which are old veterans: nephthitis (2 varieties) Golden Pothos, grape-leaved ivy, miniature schefflera; regular schefflera, variegated hibiscus, and one hothouse azalea that has inexplicably survived for seven years***. It is possible. I don't know why.

* *Sadly, Russ and Dave and Ted are now gone. You would have liked them.*

** *The photo from 2023 includes relative newcomers Clivia and Chinese Evergreen.*

** *The hothouse azalea finally gave up a few years after this was originally published.*