

## Plants for Inside

Most gardeners like houseplants, some love them, and a few hold to the belief that soil and any accompanying growths belong outdoors. Some gardeners prefer plants that require no more care than a pet rock. This group welcomes dried arrangements, silk flowers, or Heaven forbid, plastic blooms!

Kings, queens, and robber barons may be blessed with conservatories but this conversation is about modest endeavors to provide plants to brighten homes, not castles. For the novice venture into the domain of houseplants it is essential to start with the house, not the plants. Study the spaces where you plan to add greenery or vines or color.

Check the location of windows, intensity of the light, the direction from where it comes, artificial lighting, presence of warm air in winter or cold draughts from air-conditioning. How large is the space? How wide are your windowsills? Are these spaces shared with pets and toddlers? Is your house graced with skylights or a humidifier?

After analyzing the house, the next step is listing a few favorites. Do you want a lemon tree or African violets? Do you want a Victorian Wardian case for mosses and other rarities? Can you contrive a spot impervious to spilled water? How much time you have determines the number that can be successfully grown.

This is the point where I consult an expert! Master Gardener, Mary Simpson, who possesses not only a wealth of experience in all sorts of gardening but has one of the loveliest collections of houseplants I have seen, offers this advice.

“Over the past 38 years I have grown and experimented with many different houseplants. Some which are easy and some which are not. Some of the easy ones are Begonias, Philodendron, Devil’s Ivy (*Epipremnum aureum*, a strong-growing climber) Chinese evergreens (*Aglaonema commutatum*, good for low to medium light) Jade plant (*Crassula ovata*), Ferns, African violets (*Saintpaulia ionantha*) Dieffenbachia (i.e. Dumb cane sap is poisonous causing temporary speechlessness and pain- ergo, “dumb” cane) and Arrowhead plant (aquatic plant *Sagittaria*).

“Begonias are among the easiest. 1. Cut stems about four or five inches long. 2. Remove lower leaves, about half. 3. If leaves are large, trim off outer half. 4. Dip in rooting hormone. 5. Place in small cup or pot with drainage. 6. Place in plastic bag and put in shade. This is a good set of instructions to root many different kinds of houseplants. Begonias, Philodendron, Devils Ivy, and Arrowhead can also be rooted in water. Chinese evergreen and Jade can be rooted by placing cuttings in half sand and half-potting mix. Do not cover with plastic; just keep soil damp. These are succulents and will rot if kept wet. Ferns should be repotted and divided each spring. Water with ½ strength liquid fertilizer each week. Do not allow to dry out and DO NOT OVERWATER!

“Dieffenbachias can be rooted in spring by taking cuttings and placing them in shade. African violets are easy to root by taking leaf cuttings. Keep damp: do not cover in plastic. When leaves root they will send out small leaves. When the new leaves get larger, cut off the parent leaf and plant in small pot. Water when soil surface is dry, usually once a week with ¼ strength liquid fertilizer. Keep in a southbound window. African violet leaves do not like to rest on the rim of terra cotta pots: ceramic is good.” Mary adds that TLC is the main part and as a retired nurse, she knows how essential that is! Following Mary Simpson’s directions will give new life to your inside garden. Thank you Mary.

My happy failure: I was given a cutting in early December of a plant I had never met. It is Jewel Orchid, *Ludisia discolor*, aka *Haemaria discolor dawsoniana*. It is possible that it has an additional name as neither of those given in the Ortho Books Guide to Houseplants could be found among the 15,000 plants in the American Horticultural Society’s A-Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants.

Jewel Orchid is a true orchid but can be grown in ordinary potting soil. The houseplant guide says it is grown for its near black velvety leaves with red veining, not for the insignificant flowers. Those flowers are indeed small, a series of a half-inch florescence extending from a fat bulb over weeks, but each one is a perfect miniature of a corsage orchid. I find it astonishing that such perfection can be exhibited on such a small scale.

The cuttings are still in water with no indication that propagation is on their agenda. Alas, a species best left to experts!