



## CHOOSING A HOUSE PLANT

There are two ways to select a house plant for your home or office. If you have a spot that needs a decorative touch, or you need to replace a plant for a favorite container, you want to select a plant that will be viable in the situation you already have. On the other hand, if you see a plant that appeals to you, you will need to adapt your environment to the plant's needs. Either way, you must consider the following factors: light, temperature, humidity, size or space, and maintenance requirements.

Available **light** is probably the primary factor in selecting an appropriate plant for the home or office. Knowing the orientation of the windows in a given space will aid greatly in determining where to place indoor plants. In addition to identifying which direction (north, south, north-east, etc.) a window faces, it is important to consider those factors which affect the amount of light plants will actually receive. Deep roof overhangs, porches and awnings, trees, and nearby buildings can greatly reduce light intensity, as can drapes, blinds, shutters, and even sheer curtains. Keep in mind, also, that light intensity diminishes quickly as you move from the window toward the interior of the space.

Some plants have a wide range of light conditions that they will tolerate, while others have very specific needs. Plants may adapt to less than ideal conditions, but they may not maintain the attractive appearance they had in preferred light levels. Inadequate light or light levels that are too high can cause stress to the plant, making it susceptible to pests and disease. If you do not have the right light conditions for the plant you desire, remember that any plant can be grown with the correct artificial light conditions.

Indoor plants are usually tropical or subtropical in origin. *Tropical* plants are adapted to consistently warm **temperatures** throughout the year. These plants can suffer from the cold drafts of a nearby exterior door in winter, or from too close proximity to the cold of a window pane. *Subtropical* plants are often adapted to a mild winter period, where temperatures are 20 degrees or more cooler than warm season days and nights. While they cannot survive freezing winter temperatures, these plants may actually suffer from being close to heat sources in winter. Many of these species do well on glassed-in porches or other situations where the temperatures drop at night, but remain above freezing.

Long-favored house plants like Heart-leaf philodendron or Corn plants have maintained their popularity in large part due to their tolerance for the dry air of centrally heated or cooled indoor environments. Average house **humidity** is somewhere around 35 to 40 percent, while offices may be even drier. To grow higher-humidity-loving plants like ferns and orchids, you need to increase the humidity in the immediate area of the plants. One way to accomplish this is to cluster plants closely together so that their combined area of damp soil can evaporate where it will do the most good. Be aware that plants that are touching may transfer pests from one plant to another, or may suffer from reduced air circulation, so watch for signs of either problem. Another trick is to set plant pots on wide trays or saucers of damp pebbles, there again allowing the water in the pebbles to evaporate around the plant's foliage. Light misting of water on the foliage on a daily basis will help some; however, the benefits of this treatment are very temporary, and serve more to keep foliage clean of dust.

It is important to learn something about the mature **size** and habit of a plant when selecting a house plant for a particular container or space. Some house plants can be purchased as tiny starter plants, but will grow into 50' specimens over time, while others are so slow-growing, they will always look too small for your favorite container. Ceiling height is especially important when purchasing a palm tree, as these plants cannot be maintained at a particular size by pruning. With a palm, all you can do is remove fronds or leaves, while the trunk must be allowed to continue its growth. A Ficus tree, on the other hand, can be pruned on a regular basis to control its overall size for years. Select an upright grower to show off an especially pretty pot, and choose a trailing or creeping plant where there is a height restriction or where the plant is situated above eye level.

If you love to fiddle with plants, select plants that grow quickly, need regular dead-heading (removal of spent flowers), frequent watering, or lots of pruning (like bonsai). If you travel, and are not available to give plants regular attention, choose low-**maintenance** plants that are fairly self-sufficient like Snake plants, Cast-iron plant, or a variety of succulents. Keeping house plants should enhance your life and your surroundings.