

# Houseplant Problems and Solutions

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Houseplants are subject to a number of problems. Their care providers cause a surprising number of these difficulties. Before attempting to determine the cause of houseplant problems, consider the care the plant has received. Once any self-inflicted problems can be eliminated, then you can begin to look at other causes. Some of the most common problems found on houseplants are listed below.

## Sudden Leaf Drop

This problem is most commonly associated with a sudden change of environment. Plants adapt slowly to various growing conditions. Sudden changes – for example, moving plants from the patio in the summer to the low light interior for winter – leave the plants unprepared to cope. Sudden leaf drop (especially common on weeping fig) is a natural condition triggered by the changing light levels of the season. Most figs drop a few leaves in the spring as long days arrive and a lot of leaves in the fall when short days return. Under fertilizing and/or under watering will increase the amount of leaf drop. Also, check to make sure plants are not infested with spider mites (see *Leaves Mottled on the Upper Surface*, page 2), because this pest sometimes causes this type of problem.

## Slow Loss of Lower Leaves

This problem usually indicates a low level of fertility. The plant is moving nutrients from the lowest (and

oldest) leaves at the base of the plant to the growing points. Repot if needed and begin a fertilizer program.

## Marginal or Tip Leaf Burn

Over fertilization causes marginal or tip leaf burn on many plants, but that same symptom can also occur from under watering. A few plants, especially dracaenas and airplane plants, show tip burn on their leaves from high fluoride levels sometimes found in water or as a contaminant from potting soil. Some private wells have poor quality water (high salt, very hard water or water high in carbonates or bicarbonates). Continued use of this kind of water can lead to a slow, gradual buildup of salts in the soil. When salt levels get high enough, the plant is unable to take up sufficient water and produces smaller leaves and sometimes leaves with marginal burn. Repotting with fresh potting soil is usually the best solution to the problem of burned leaves. Dracaenas with tip-burned leaves can be reshaped with scissors to make the leaves more attractive.

## Leaves Small and Off-Color

This is usually associated with poor nutrition, but the same symptom can be caused by over watering, which kills roots and causes symptoms of poor nutrition. If over watering is not

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the cause, begin a regular fertilizer program and stick with it. Usually, fertilizing with a liquid fertilizer solution on a monthly basis is adequate. Reduce feeding during the low-light days of wintertime.

## Plants Don't Grow

Remember that plants require time to adjust to a new environment, so don't expect new plants to begin growth immediately in a new environment. The most common cause of poor growth is insufficient light. Plants require a location where there is enough light to read a newspaper, not that your average houseplant is interested in keeping up with the news. With less light than that, even plants adapted to low light conditions will just sit there and produce no new growth. Try moving the plant to a brighter location or closer to the window.

## Plants Don't Flower

Flowering houseplants produce blooms based on two basic plans: 1) those that are called photo-accumulators and 2) those that respond to some type of change of environment (usually the length of the day). The most common types (African violets, peace lilies, antherium, tropical hibiscus, flowering maple) are photo-accumulators. This means they must receive enough light over a long enough period to store sufficient energy to flower. If low light conditions prevail, they simply don't accumulate enough photosynthate to maintain normal plant function and flower too. Give these plants brighter conditions and enough time, and they should begin flowering.

The second group of plants responds to some environmental signal (Thanksgiving cactus, poinsettias, moth orchids, kalanchoe, amaryllis) and flowers during a particular time of year, according to the changes of the season. Each plant has a specific set of conditions that promote flowering, and if not provided, blooming will not occur. Check the Internet for information about conditions that trigger blooming for a particular plant.

## Tips of Fig Tree Dying

This is usually caused by a weak pathogen known as Phomes tip blight. It attacks the youngest twigs of the plant, especially under high humidity conditions. Prune out affected branches, making the cut several inches below the zone of infection. Dip your pruning shears in a 10 percent bleach solution between cuts.

## Leaves Mottled on the Upper Surface

Mites, actually related to spiders with eight legs and the ability to spin webs, represent one of the most common pest problems of houseplants. The **two-spotted spider mite** is a tiny, dust-sized pest that is visible to young, sharp-eyed youth but invisible to oldsters unless isolated on a piece of white paper. Then you can see the dust-sized insects crawling across the page. These insects feed by scraping their mouthparts across the leaf surface, so plants have a yellow/green-mottled appearance. In severe cases, webbing may be seen. They are favored by warm, dry conditions and hampered by cool, moist, high-humidity locations. Not surprisingly, they are most injurious during the winter heating season or during the summer months. Spraying with insecticidal soap, the use of ultrafine horticultural oil or misting with warm, soapy water helps reduce populations. Because mites increase so quickly, spraying with insecticidal soap twice a week for two to three weeks may be needed for control. Specific miticides are not generally registered for use with houseplants by non-licensed homeowners. Most insecticides are ineffective against mites and can make pest populations worse.

## Leaves Distorted With the Edges Curled Down

**Cyclamen mite** and **broad mite** are two tiny mites that feed in the growing point of the plant. They cause new leaves to be curled at the edges and twisted. In severe cases, the growing terminal will be extremely distorted. These mites are most common on African violets and English ivy, but they are occasionally found on other plants. Mites are almost impossible to control, so most people destroy infested plants.

## Plants Have White Globbs on the Stems

**Mealybugs** are small, white insects (usually about the size of a match head) covered with a white, meal-like coating found at the juncture of the petiole and stem. They feed by sucking juice from the stem. Mealybugs are immobile once they reach maturity. White, immature insects often can be seen crawling slowly around on infested plants. They attack a wide assortment of plants but are never found on ferns. A simple method of control is to use an alcohol-soaked

cotton swab and physically kill them one at a time. This works when only a single plant is involved, but this method can be a bit tedious for many plants. A fine grade of horticultural oil provides effective control. Make sure to get good coverage when spraying the plant. Systemic insecticides, such as Orthene and Bayer Advanced, can also be used. They are most effective during the summer months when plants are actively growing.

## Floor Is Sticky

Several kinds of scale insects are known, but the **brown hemispherical scale** is most common on houseplants. It is about 1/16 inch long and shaped like a turtle with a hard shell. It feeds with a piercing-sucking mouthpart and never moves once it begins to feed. The scales are difficult to see and often blend with the woody stems of plants, like ficus or schefflera. The first notice that a pest is present is often the sticky goo on the floor, table or leaves. This goo is called “**honeydew**” and is the feces of the feeding insects. Best control is achieved with the use of lightweight horticultural oil or systemic insecticides, such as Orthene or Bayer Advanced.

## Small Gnats Buzzing Around Plant

One other insect often found associated with houseplants is a small, black, gnat-like insect that buzzes around the soil. This is the adult form of the

**fungus gnat**. The larval stage feeds on organic debris and decaying organic matter found in potting soil. Another insect, the **shore fly**, is similar in appearance and activity but is less common. Fungus gnats are more annoying than harmful, so control is seldom needed for the health of the plant. But if they become too much of a nuisance, larvae can easily be killed by drenching the soil with an insecticide such as malathion.

Houseplant pests are problematic because they attack a wide array of plants and because they thrive in the kind of environment we maintain inside our homes. Scouting to make sure that insect problems are not brought into the home is the first step in preventing pest outbreaks. It might be a good idea to establish a quarantine unit where new plants are first isolated before being brought into the area where most of your plant collection resides.

If insecticides are chosen for insect control, be sure to read and carefully follow label recommendations. Spray plants out of doors if possible, and leave them outside until the foliage is completely dry before bringing them back inside. Make sure you know the identity of the pest before you begin spraying. Do not spray when plants are wilted or during the heat of the day.

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