

# The Watering Can



By Beverly O'Keefe, URI Master Gardener

## Water and House Plants

Daylight savings time and the winter chill arrived just as I was transferring my indoor plants from the greenhouse (unheated) to the four-season porch. This annual process takes a full day and includes debugging, repotting, clipping and discarding. The job is made easier since I learned to scrub up the new pots in advance, have a good supply of potting soil, and horticultural oil to smother the little bugs and mites. This annual chore is best done on a cloudy day so the sun does not burn the plant leaves.

Now several weeks have passed and I can see which plants have made the transfer to indoors easily and which plants need additional care to settle in as a house plants. Knowing a plant's light, water, nutrition, and humidity needs makes it easy to avoid and to remedy the most common plant problems. Of course, finding the correct "water balance" for each plant is at the top of my list. The biggest problem with growing and maintaining indoor plants is too much water – so here are some "water wise" tips:

- The smaller the plant, the quicker it will dry out. Water more frequently than the larger potted plants.
- Use water at room temperature. Plants don't like wet feet, so let excess water drain out.
- Pay attention to the type of water you are using to water your plants. Public water suppliers treat water with lime to balance the pH for drinking water. Heavily chlorinated water or water that's been run through a water softener can cause browning tips. If you see brown tips and you are not overwatering, try using rainwater or distilled water.
- The containers you use also make a difference. Plastic containers hold water, while clay pulls water away from the soil. Use pots appropriate to the plant's water needs.
- Where you place the plant also matters. Plants that are in direct sunlight need more watering than those that are not.
- Watch the plant. If the leaves are drooping, the plant may need water.
- Also keep an eye on the soil. Checking the soil moisture can be as simple as using your finger. Insert your finger in about one inch of soil. If it feels wet, you don't need to water it. Soil moisture meters, which can be purchased at garden centers or on the web, and work by placing a metal probe into the soil.
- Gnats are attracted to damp, exposed soil. Keep fungus gnats or tiny, black flies away from your plant's damp soil by simply pouring small gravel or decorative rocks over the top. This creates a protective barrier and doubles as a mulching method, so you end up watering less.
- Always remove any gift wrapping on the plant's pot before watering.
- Low humidity levels in your home can not only make plants look bad but can also make them susceptible to diseases and bugs. Needed moisture can be replaced in several ways: Install a humidifier or a tabletop fountain; use a water-filled spray bottle to mist around your plants; don't saturate them; or, create a pebble tray using a waterproof container, even a pie plate. Lay some pebbles in the container and add water to the top of the pebbles. Sit your plants on top of the pebbles. The humidity brought up from the evaporation of the water will help your plants remain healthy. I try to give my plants a shower once a month by grouping several plants in the bathroom shower with a light tepid spray.
- If you are going out of town, set up a self-watering system. For example, you can saturate a cotton shoelace and place one end of the shoelace in a dish of water. Insert the opposite end of the shoelace into the soil of the potted plant (bottom up). The water will "wick up" the shoelace and sustain the plant until you return.

**Finally, back off on your watering schedule.** The most important thing is to know each plant's watering needs and provide as much water as is needed. Don't water plants during the winter as often as you did during the spring and summer because their growth rate is considerably slower. In fact, you may find that you can cut back on the frequency of your watering schedule by half or even two-thirds. For example, cacti and succulents may only need water once a month.

Follow these helpful hints and most if not all of your houseplants will make it through the winter. Remember – now and again treat your plants to a warm shower to remind them the warm weather is just around the corner.

Happy Holidays to Everyone!

The RI Water Lady