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Tropical Foliage Plants

Foliage Plants are like adding a breath of fresh air to a room and in fact, that's exactly what they do - increase the amount of oxygen in a room. They are also very attractive, decorative and functional, as well as being relatively easy to care for.

Light

Light is the most important element in successfully growing a houseplant. Without adequate light a plant cannot produce the food it needs to survive.

It is almost always better to give a plant more light than it needs rather than not enough. For example, the Dracaena family is generally regarded as a low-light to medium-light family of plants, but it is common to see *Dracaena massangeana* and *Dracaena marginata*, among others, growing in the direct, blazing sun of the tropics. This family of plants grows naturally in high light but it also grows naturally in lower light areas, and is thus well suited for most homes and offices.

High-light plants such as *ficus benjamina* and *Crotons* cannot be forced into lower light areas to suit a design function unless they are supplemented with proper additional electric lighting. Additional lighting may be provided in the form of spot grow bulbs, fluorescent grow tubes or various kinds of high-intensity, industrial-type lighting.

Water

More houseplants are killed by overwatering than by all other factors combined. Water requirements vary for each different type of plant. Generally, the more light a plant is exposed to, the more water it requires. Temperature, humidity, soil mix and the type of container are all contributing factors to a plant's need for moisture.

It is a good idea to check plants at a regularly scheduled time, but it is almost impossible to say that a particular plant will need water every week or any other time frame because all of the above factors may vary from time to time.

Moisture Meters can be a valuable tool when checking plants to see if they require water. However, they should be used as a guide only; always use your senses to determine if the Moisture Meter is working properly. Droopy plants usually indicate a need for water, but may also be a result of stress caused by overwatering. A plant standing in a saucer or pot of water will absorb too much moisture through its root system. The plant will not have an opportunity to dry out. This will result in a plant performing poorly, even though the water given at any one time may not have been excessive.

Temperature and Humidity

Tropical plants will survive a wide range of temperatures, but like ourselves, tropical plants find that moderate temperatures in the range of 15 to 30°C are ideal. Evening temperatures should generally drop about 5°C to sustain plant vitality. Draughts, air conditioning and heating ducts usually have an adverse effect on most tropical plants.

Most plants prefer higher humidity levels than the average house can provide, but they adapt to their surroundings and normal house humidity levels are usually not a problem.

Fertilizer

Some fertilization of tropical plants is necessary to provide the proper nutrients to sustain overall plant health and vigor. Plants should be fed when in an "actively growing" stage, which in Canada is usually from March to October. It is better to feed more often with diluted concentrations of fertilizer than giving a double dose once in a while. Never fertilize a dry plant as this can cause root burn.

Most foliage plants respond well to balanced fertilizers such as 20-20-20, while flowering plants prefer a higher concentration of phosphorous, such as 15-30-15.

Disease and Insects

Diseases and insects are something that plant owners should be aware of but should not be cause for a great deal of concern as long as the plants are purchased from a legitimate garden centre where they have been cared for properly.