HOUSEPLANTS

Adapted from the previous Certification Training Manual
of the Idaho Nursery Association
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Revised by the Montana Nursery and Landscape Association 2002
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In the last few years there has been a tremendous upsurge in the popularity of houseplants, creating an entirely new market in the retail nursery industry. Retail garden centers which are not catering to the high demand for houseplants are missing an opportunity to add profitable sales with little additional cost in space or labor.

Merchandising

Many retailers meet the demand for houseplants by installing indoor plant departments in their garden centers. To succeed at this, however, several techniques should be considered.

One of the most important marketing techniques is display selling. Plants should not be indiscriminately scattered about the store, which makes it difficult to care for them and also makes it hard for customers to select the plants they are looking for. Plants look better in groupings of mass displays. Group plants according to their care requirements to make maintenance easier.

Plants may be displayed in several ways to make selection easier for customers. Mature plants may be placed next to smaller plants so that customers can see what they will grow to look like. Plants may also be grouped by type, such as hanging plants, palms, ferns, cactus, etc. Plants may be displayed in containers or planters.

Related items, such as pots, hangers, macramé, potting soil and houseplant fertilizers, should be in nearby displays to encourage tie-in sales.

Place all plants so that they are visible without moving other plants. Keep leaves and containers clean and label each plant with its name and price. Not knowing the price is an excuse for not buying.

Cleanliness and plant care are important in selling houseplants. Never allow plants to appear neglected or unhealthy. A dead leaf might not indicate a sick plant, but customers may think it does. If a plant doesn't look good after normal cleaning, trimming and potting, throw it out. It's not practical to nurse sick plants in a retail shop. Remove dead or dying plants from displays.

Keep display areas and aisles clean and keep plants free from insect infestation. Inspect all plants upon arrival to help prevent infestation of other plants in the garden center.

Two often-overlooked aspects of houseplant sales are information and education. Many people who buy houseplants have little knowledge regarding the care and feeding of their particular plants. Interested customers may ask for instructions but many customers don't think to ask. Salespeople should show interest in each customer's selection and ask if he or she is familiar with its care.

A good way to supplement or reinforce information salespeople give out is to have brochures, books, and flyers available. Customers who know how to water a plant and whether it will do well in a sunny south window or better in a shaded north window will have more confidence in their ability to grow that plant and may, therefore, be more eager to buy.

No matter how large or small a retail operation is, the most important factors in selling houseplants are clean, effective displays, good quality merchandise, and well-informed and enthusiastic personnel.

Growth Requirements

All plants require proper temperatures, light, water, and nutrients to grow. Light and temperature requirements have much to do with the class of plant. Most houseplants need bright indirect light. Few do well in low light conditions for extended periods of time. Table 11-1 lists the growth requirements for some common houseplants.

Most houseplants come from warm countries, and you might think they require high temperatures. Surprisingly, most do well in rooms that are on the cool side -- provided the plants are free from rapid temperature changes.

Low humidity in buildings as well as drafts can be detrimental to houseplants. Plants should not be placed close to heat registers, fireplaces or woodstoves. Cold drafts from air conditioners or opening doors in the winter can cause problems for houseplants by shocking them. Leaf drop is a common symptom of a draft problem.

One of the most important growth requirements is water, which makes up to 90% of many plant tissues, carries food throughout the plant, and keeps stems and leaves firm. Water continuously enters a plant through its roots and is transpired through its leaves. The rate of absorption depends upon the root system, the size of the plant, and the composition of the potting soil, aeration, and environmental factors such as temperature, light, and humidity.

Because of the many factors influencing water uptake, it's practically impossible to set down strict rules on watering plants. Generally speaking, you can tell when a plant needs water by the look or the feel of its soil, or by the weight of the pot. A thorough watering followed by a period of time to allow the soil to start drying permits air to be drawn into the soil. Plant roots need oxygen for life and growth, and if the soil is constantly saturated by water the plant will soon die. The primary cause of death in houseplants is over watering.

Tap water may be used to water plants if it has not been chemically softened with sodium or fluorinated. Let tap water stand for 2 hours to allow it to warm to room temperature and to allow chlorine to escape from the water.

The best and quickest way to water is from the top. Fill up the pot until water drains out at the bottom of the pot. If the pot is sitting in a saucer, drain off the excess water. Do not let the pot sit in water. If the soil has become completely dry and has shrunken away from the pot, immerse the whole pot in a tub of water until bubbles stop rising from the soil; then remove the container from the water and drain off excess water. Another way to water is from the bottom. Set the pot in a container of water and allow it to sit for 15 to 20 minutes, or as long as it takes to draw up moisture, then remove and drain. Never allow the plant to sit in water for prolonged periods of time. When watering from the bottom, it's necessary to leach regularly to prevent any buildup of fertilizers and toxic salts by flushing soil with water.

When plants are moved from the favorable conditions of a moist greenhouse into rooms with reduced light, lower humidity, less frequent watering and artificially high day/night temperatures, the plants must pass through a period of adjustment, and leaves may turn yellow or drop off at first and flowers may wilt. It is impossible for the plant's roots to take up moisture rapidly enough to replace that lost by the foliage exposed to dry air despite the fact that soil is kept well-watered. After two or three weeks, a plant will acclimate to the new surroundings and, with gradually reduced watering; the plant can be maintained in good condition for a remarkably long time.

In order to maintain healthy, vigorous houseplants, you must supply nutrients on a regular basis. In general practice, apply a balanced fertilizer every 1 or 2 months while growth is rapid, and once or twice during the winter months. Young, vigorously growing plants can be fertilized twice as often.

Most commercially prepared houseplant fertilizers work reasonably well. Foliage plants need a fertilizer with an N-P-K analysis ratio of about 2-1-1, while blooming plants require a ratio closer to 1-2-1.

Physical damage is the most common reason for browning leaves, caused by frequently being brushed against or hit by passing people or pets. This problem is often misdiagnosed as disease or insect damage. One obvious remedy is to move the plant to a more protected spot.

Insect problems are not common on indoor plants but they can be brought into the house on new plants or on plants brought in from the patio. Keep new plants isolated for a week or two before placing them with other plants. Inspect plants when watering. Most infestations can be eradicated easily when caught early. Most insects can be washed off with soapy water or swabbed away with alcohol. If serious infestations require chemical control, be careful to follow the directions on the label. Also be sure that the product is safe for indoor use.

Summary

1. In the last few years there has been a tremendous upsurge in the popularity of houseplants.

2. An important marketing technique is display selling.

3. Related items such as pots, hangers, and fertilizers, should be in a nearby display for tie-in sales.

4. Salespeople should give information on care and culture for each plant sold. Provide cultural information in the form of brochures, books, and flyers.
5. The most important factors in selling houseplants are clean, effective displays, good quality merchandise, and well-informed enthusiastic personnel.

6. Water, light, and temperatures are important growth factors. Generally speaking, you can tell when a plant needs water by the look or feel of the soil. Tap water should be left overnight to warm to room temperature.

7. Nutrients should be supplied on a regular basis.

8. Over-watering is the primary cause of houseplant death.

9. Most houseplants require bright, indirect light. Few tolerate low light conditions.

Table 11-1
Coded Growth Requirements

In the following list of popular houseplants there is a combination of letters and numerals in brackets after each plant. The combination of letters and numbers indicates the general environmental and growing conditions which the particular plant performs best in.

Temperature
- C Cool or cold, 40-45 degrees night, rising to 55-60 degrees.
- I Intermediate, 50-55 degrees night, rising to 70-75 degrees by day.
- S Warm, 60-65 degrees night, rising to 80-85 degrees by day.

Location
- 1 Tolerates the average condition in home or office, recommended for use as houseplants.
- 2 Needs fresh air and good light to succeed.
- 3 Needs greenhouse conditions

Soil
- L Loam clay or good garden soil.
- H Soil rich in humus.

Light
- B Bright light or full sun.
- F Filtered or diffused light.
- N No sun, shady, away from direct light.

Moisture
- D Dry, must completely dry out between waterings.
- M Moist, evenly moist but not wet.
- W Wet, constantly wet.

Example:
Aglaonema modestum
Chinese evergreen (S-1-L-N-M)*

Likes warm temperature, good houseplant, loam soil, no direct light, keep moist. (*These recommendations are based on the care guide developed by Alfred B. Graf, author of "Exotica").

Aglaonema modestum
Chinese Evergreen (S-1-L-N-M)

Aphelandra squarrosa
Zebra Plant (S-1-H-F-M)

Ardisia crispa
Coral Berry (I-2-L-F-M)

Asparagus plumosus
Plumosa Fern (I-2-L-F-M)

Asparagus densiflorus 'Sprengeri'
Asparagus Fern (I-2-L-F-M)

Araucaria excelesa
Norfolk Island Pine (I-1-H-F-M)

Begonia rex
Rex Begonia (S-2-3-H-F-M)

Brassaia actinophylla
(Schefflera or Queensland
Umbrella Tree (S-1-L-B-D)

Caladiaum hortulanum
Caladiaum (S-3-2-1-H-F-M)

Chamaedorea elegans
Bella Palm or Dwf. Palms (S-1-L-N-M)

Chlorophytum comosum
Spider plant (1-2-L-F-M)

Cissus rhombifolia
Grape Ivy (S-3-H-F-M)

Cordyline terminalis
Hawaiian Ti plant (S-2-L-F-M)

Crasula argentea
Jade plant (1-2-L-B-F-D)

Dieffenbachia amoena
Dumb Cane (S-1-L-F-D)

Dizygotheca elegantissium
False Aralia (S-2-L-F-M)

Dracaena marginata
Madagascar Dragon Tree (S-1-L-F-W)

Dracaena fragrans massangeana
Corn plant (S-1-L-F-W)

Ficus elastica Decora
Indian Rubber Plant (S-1-2-L-F-M)

Ficus benjamina
Weeping Fig (S-1-2-L-F-M)

Ficus lyrata
Fiddleleaf Fig (S-1-2-L-F-M)

Gardenia jasminoides
Gardenia (S-2-H-B-M)

Hedera helix
English Ivy (C-I-2-L-B-M)

Hoya carnosa
Wax Plant (I-S-2-L-B-D)

Howeia belmoreana
Kentia Palm (I-1-L-F-W)

Maranta leuconeura
Prayer Plant (S-3-L-F-W)

Monstera deliciosa
Split-leaf Philodendron (S-1-L-F-M)

Nephrolepsis exaltata 'Bostoniensis'
Boston Fern (I-2-L-F-M)

Nephrolepsis exaltata 'Fluffy Ruffles'
Fluffy Ruffles Fern (I-2-L-F-M)

Peperomia caperata 'Emerald Ripple'
Emerald Ripple Peperomia(S-1-L-F-D)

Peperomia obtusifolia variegata
Variegated Peperomia (S-1-L-F-D)

Philodendron orycardium
Cordatum or
Trailing Philodendron (S-1-L-F-M)

Philodendron panduraeformae
Fiddle leaf Philodendron (S-1-L-P-M)

Plectranthus australis
Swedish Ivy (I-S-1-L-F-M)

Saintpaulia
African Violet (S-I-C-3-H-F-M)

Sansevieria trifasciata
Snake Plant (S-1-L-F-D)

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Chapter Review

A. Describe the concept of display selling and how it can be used in a retail nursery to sell houseplants.

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B. List seven factors that influence water uptake by plants. 1. _____

2. _____ 3. _____

4. _____ 5. _____

6. _____ 7. _____

C. What can happen to a plant whose soil is kept too wet for prolonged periods of time?

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D. A customer who purchased a houseplant a week ago tells you that the plant has turned yellow and some of the leaves have fallen off. What might be the problem? Suggest a solution.

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E. What is the most common reason that a houseplant dies?

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F. In general, what level of light do most houseplants require?

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