



Easy Houseplants

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QUESTION – *I want to get a friend a houseplant –and one for myself – but I must admit that neither of us have very green thumbs. What do you suggest?*

ANSWER:

I also enjoy houseplants, but prefer not to spend a lot of time with maintenance. Houseplants are a fun and easy method of gardening and bring in the outdoors all year/season long. Many houseplants also help clean the air inside your house! The first thing to think about - before you even think about buying a plant – is what kind of maintenance you want to provide this plant and secondly - where the plant is going to live. You can save yourself a lot of expense and frustration by doing a little advance planning before you open your checkbook. First, where is the plant going to live? What kind of light does the area receive? You can categorize light as bright, medium or low. Bright light is typically a very sunny southern exposure. Medium light can be considered any area that is easy for you to read a newspaper in without strain. Low light is an area where you must strain to read. There are many plants that can tolerate low light, which is what many of us have in our houses, but you must pick the right plant.

Other things to consider are the temperatures, the watering conditions and the humidity requirements. Typically, a plant that requires low light also requires a lower level of moisture, while conversely a plant that requires a high level of light usually requires more water. Another important consideration is the size that the plant could eventually reach. Do you have the space to accommodate this plant, as it grows bushy and large? You do not want to end up with a plant that outgrows your area – whether it is intended to remain a tabletop plant or as a floor plant.

Once you know your own environment and the basics of what plants require to thrive, you need to choose the right plant. Assuming you would prefer low maintenance plants, some of the options available are listed below.

Very Easy Plants

(Many of these plants can go up to three weeks without water.)

Barrel cactus has modified leaves with sharp spikes for protection in the wild.

Cast-iron plant (*Aspidistra*) can handle low light (north facing), high light (but not direct sun) and extreme temperature changes; it's also drought-tolerant and slow-growing.

Corn plant (*Dracaena*) is a slow-growing plant with a thick base to store water; it's available in many varieties and colors and can grow quite large.

Jade plant is a popular succulent that is easy to propagate by planting leaves in the soil. They are basically impossible to kill, as the only killer is too much water. They like light, so place them near a window. Make sure jades are in a big enough pot - they grow fast and therefore are top heavy and easy to tip over. The leaves that fall from these plants can be propagated into new ones.

Medicine plant (*Aloe vera*) is best known for its plump leaves that can provide a soothing gel for cuts and burns; the plant is fast-growing and displays a beautiful flower spike. Aloe plants like a lot of light but are durable. Propagate by cutting plantlets that grow alongside a parent plant at the root. Repot into a new plant.

Rabbit's ear (a member of the **kalanchoe** family) is a moderately fast grower (about three new leaves every two months) and has hairy leaves that help prevent against water loss due to evaporation.

Ribbon plant (*Sansevieria*) is also known as **mother-in-law's tongue** or **snake plant**. A succulent, it has thick, waxy leaves and likes to be pot bound. It is also excellent in the home as an air-cleaning plant.

Moderately Easy Plants

Golden pothos is a member of the philodendron family; it is fast-growing and has striking variegated leaves.

Heart-leaf philodendron (*Philodendron scandens oxycardium*) has - you guessed it - heart-shaped leaves. This variety dates back to the Victorian age, when people first started getting interested in houseplants. A houseplant favorite, philodendron is fast growing and does well on a trellis or as a hanging plant.

Rubber plant (*Ficus elastica robusta*) features leaves that darken to deep burgundy with more light exposure and revert to green in low-light conditions. Rubber plants like to dry out between waterings, as the only killer is too much water. Rubber plants don't need to be repotted often, but like jade, they get top heavy.

Spider plant, or air plant, is extremely adaptable and propagates easily via "pups," or plantlets, that emerge on long stalks from the mother plant. This plant seems to do well in any amount of light. Spider plants enjoy crowded roots. You do not have to repot as often, so you can wait until it is almost busting out of its pot. Water when topsoil is dry by thoroughly drenching the soil. Just place in sink, and run the water on a low volume for five minutes. You can plant offshoots from your spider plant. As little plants form on hanging stems, pull off the main plant, place it in water until it roots, then repot for a new plant

Umbrella tree, or Hawaiian **schefflera**, is fast-growing and easy to contain in size by clipping the top leaves.

Ivy plants such as pathos or devil's ivy require low light and can withstand dryness. They are great for mantels, as the leaves grow bigger the longer the plant grows. These are also great as hanging plants. Place in a room without windows or much sunlight, and these little guys can handle it.

If you like palms, try a **parlor palm**. They don't require much light and can thrive in fluorescent office lights. They also don't require a lot of water.

The **African violet** requires a fair amount of light. If it is too dark, the plant's leaves will let you know by lifting themselves upward.

I hope you can find a plant you and your friend will love from this list. The <http://www.hgtv.com/hgtv/gardening> website was used as a resource for some of the information for this article. Locally, the Dutch Plant Farm has a wide variety of houseplants available year round.

For more information about horticulture or the Master Gardener Program in Frederick County, call the Frederick County Office of the Maryland Cooperative Extension, 301- 600-1596, or visit <http://www.frederick.umd.edu/>. Our mission is to educate Maryland residents about safe, effective and sustainable horticultural practices that build healthy gardens, landscapes and communities.