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UH-OH! WHAT'S WRONG WITH MY HOUSEPLANT?

By Maritta Perry Grau, Master Gardener

Breathing a sigh of relief that the December get-togethers are over? Holiday decorations all packed away? No doubt you're looking over your newly pristine house, and what do you spot? That new houseplant a guest gave you? Is it shedding leaves? Drooping? What to do so that it takes its rightful place with the rest of the neat and clean household?

Some of these most popular hostess gifts include African violets, Amaryllis, Christmas cactus (its leaves are more scalloped and less pointed than the Thanksgiving and Easter cacti), cyclamen, Norfolk Island pine, and phalaenopsis or moth orchid. As we rarely plant these outside (imagine my surprise several years ago when in France for a friend's September wedding, I saw cyclamen being used as a pretty groundcover), you may have some questions about how to care for them, what diseases or pests to watch out for.

You may want to check on the internet at a -.org or .-edu website for the most reliable instructions to care for your specific plant. So what are some of the outward signs that your plant is in trouble? Below are just a few of the diseases and pests you'll want to watch for.

DISEASES

White coating on the leaves: This is usually a sign of powdery mildew fungus. It is common on rosemary grown indoors and may happen when plants are crowded together. It usually disappears when the plants are moved further apart or are taken outside in the spring. Powdery mildew can be aggressive, so you may want to isolate the plant and treat it with a fungicide spray. Differing fungi affect different plants, so the same fungus that causes powdery mildew on rosemary may not be the same type that causes it on an African violet. -

Plant wilting can be caused by overwatering, not watering enough, stem cankers and root rot. What to do? Instead of garden soil, which can get compacted, use a soilless media designed for house plants. If your plant is already in garden soil, try mixing the soil with that soilless media. Water should easily drain through the container into the saucer.

Wrinkled leaves are often caused by low humidity and too little water. You may be able to rehydrate your plant in a couple of ways. One way, very popular to use with orchids, is to put two or three ice cubes on the soil surface about once a week. Another is to place the plant in a sink or tub and drench the plant and soil with lukewarm water several times. If the plant is small enough, you might put it (in its pot) in a larger pan and fill the larger pan with lukewarm water to the brim of the plant's pot. Let that sit for about 15 minutes or so until the plant has absorbed water in its pot. Take the plant/pot from its water bath and let it sit until it has finished draining, then return plant/pot to its previous location.

Bleached or whitened leaves can happen if there's too much sun or light. Acclimate the plant slowly to bright light or move it to a more northerly window. Often, putting a new plant in a brightly lit area for a few days, then moving it to the light most suitable for that type of plant, helps it to accommodate more easily to your house environment.

Yellowing leaves and faded foliage can be a result of high-soluble salts. Give the pot an immersion bath to leach salts out of the soil. Set the plant aside, scrub the salts off the pot, or replace the pot, then fill in fresh soil around the plant. Consider the source of water you use, too. You may want to use distilled water instead of water straight from the spigot. Tap water can be used if it is allowed to sit for at least 24 hours to let chlorine or other additives dissipate.

Foliage yellows or browns, wilts; crown of plant may turn black or brown: Another reason for wilting or foliage turning may be root rot. Gently take the plant out of the pot and examine the roots. If they are brown, discolored, or soft, you may have root rot, often caused by overwatering. Determining the correct amount of water needed can be difficult because in part, it depends on the house environment—how much light enters your house, how warm or cool the room is, how much humidity is in the atmosphere. Often, we think, "It's Saturday, time to water the plants." However, rather than determining a particular day to water, it's better to actually gauge the plant's needs by checking the soil's moisture level.

According to the University of Maryland's extension service (https://extension.umd.edu/resource/winter-indoor-plant-problems), "Most plastic pots will dry from the top down. Clay pots will lose moisture from the sides as well as the top." When you see a gap between the soil and the edge of the pot, kind of like a pan of overbaked brownies, you'll know the top has dried out. The root rot itself is "usually caused by fungi or fungal-like organisms… Root rot may also paradoxically cause wilting even when the soil is wet because the roots are so damaged that they cannot transport water to the leaves," says the UMD website.

- ***Pythium* root rot**: stunting, yellowing and wilting of the plants; roots appear brown or black and are soft or mushy. You can easily separate the outer portion of the root from the core. Often when you take the plant out of the potting media, most of the root system separates from the plant and is left behind in the pot.
- ***Phytophthora* root rot**: Root tips are dark brown, soft and mushy. Often plants will wilt even when adequate moisture is present in the potting media. This pathogen can also cause the lower portions of stems to turn black, brown or mushy, which can lead to lower leaf yellowing and leaf drop.
- ***Rhizoctonia* root rot** occurs when temperatures are warm and conditions are moist. The fungus grows as coarse, reddish-brown threads, often resembling spider webs, over the surface of infected stems and roots. The infected roots and lower portions of stems will turn brown and collapse. *Rhizoctonia* will infect plant foliage and cause them to become brown and matted together.

PESTS

Much like our outdoor plants, indoor plants are susceptible to some of the same pests. Below are just a few of the pests that can affect indoor plants such as African violets, begonias, ivy, jade, kalanchoe, poinsettia, and rosemary.

White dots or stippling on leaves and webbing on plant: spider mites. The spider mites often feed on the lower surface areas of leaves. "Dense foliage and poor air circulation contribute to this problem," notes the pamphlet from the University of Maryland Extension Service (https://extension.umd.edu/resource/diagnose-indoor-plant-problems). Isolate the plant if possible. If the plant and its container are small enough to handle easily, give the plant a good shower. Repeat as needed. You may also use a registered houseplant spray; however, please note that if you have a heavy infestation, the spray may just make matters worse, according to the UMD website.

Stunted or distorted plant growth: The twisted growth may be caused by aphids, tiny, sucking insects that mainly attack flowering plants, such as cyclamen. A good shower or registered insecticide for house plants may be enough to dislodge the aphids. Another cause of stunted plant growth can be a virus; in that case, the foliage may appear mottled green and yellow. If you determine that your plant's growth is due to a virus, discard the plant.

Fluffy white wax: You may spot tiny, white, cottony insects, mealybugs, just about anywhere on your plant—from foliage to buds to roots. Again, you may choose to spray the plant with a registered houseplant spray, or use an alcohol-soaked cotton swab to kill individual mealybugs. Of course, your first defense is to know how/when to water. In addition, you may want to make sure your pots are clean or new; your soil is sterile potting media, not soil you've scooped up from outside; and finally, that the plant is disease-free.

Flying insects, white or black: Those tiny white insects flitting in and out of your plant are probably white flies; black ones are fungus gnats. Use a registered insecticide, and allow the potting media to dry between waterings. You may be able to use beneficial nematodes to control fungus gnat larvae, according to the University of Maryland pamphlet.

You should know that Frederick County Master Gardener seminars and other activities—except those held outdoors or at locations other than the Extension Office—are still cancelled until further notice. In the meantime, you can find gardening information and advice online at:

- University of MD Extension Home & Garden Information Center, https://extension.umd.edu/programs/environmentnatural-resources/program-areas/home-and-garden-information-center;
- Frederick County Master Gardeners Publications, http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening;
- Facebook, http://www.facebook.com/mastergardenersfrederickcountymaryland;
- or call us at 301-600-1596.

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Yellowed Leaf Philodendron
A leaf from a philodendron vine has yellowed, is curling up, and has shriveled brown patches, indicating that it is not getting enough water. The solution would be to water it thoroughly, then keep an eye on the soil, watering more regularly going forward. (Photo courtesy of the author)

Dead Geranium
After being checked for pests, two geraniums were potted together and brought inside last fall. The one on the left did not adapt well to being inside; however, the plant on the right seems happy with the northeastern light, regular watering, and cool room temperature. (Photo courtesy of the author)

Neglected African Violet
This African violet is suffering from a lack of care. While the room temperature and light are good, it has not been watered frequently enough, as indicated by the curled leaves; in addition, sometimes it was watered on the soil surface of the pot, and water splashed on the leaves, causing leaves to die. Finally, it has not been turned often enough, so that instead of growing straight in the pot, it has spent a lot of energy growing in one direction toward the sun. (Photo courtesy of the author)

For more information about the Frederick County Master Gardener/Horticulture Program, visit: http://extension.umd.edu/locations/frederick-county/home-gardening or call Susan Trice at the University of Maryland Extension Frederick County office, 301-600-1596.
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