

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



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Why Do Leaves of Houseplants Turn Brown

During colder weather, houseplants provide the opportunity to enjoy plants indoors.

While watering them, it is easy to notice brown leaves.

Leaves with insect feeding may turn brown. Check stems and undersides of leaves for signs of insects and sticky honeydew. Broadleaved plants can be washed with soapy water and a soft brush or cloth to remove or kill insects that stay on the plant constantly. Use 1 teaspoon of mild detergent or soap per gallon of water. Although this method is time consuming, it may be the best alternative to insecticide sprays. Repeat washing if the infestation reappears.

Spider mites also cause leaf browning. These tiny insects make noticeable webs when the population is high. Wash spider mites off plants with a tepid shower of water every three to four days.

Plant diseases are rarely a problem for houseplants but may cause brown spots, blotches, internal browning, or leaf-edge browning. Root and stem-rotting diseases typically occur after plant roots are damaged by over-watering.

To help prevent problems with diseases, avoid wetting the foliage when watering, use a well-drained potting soil, and allow air circulation around the plant. Leaves with disease should be removed from the plant.

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Over-watering causes plants to have brown leaves. Check the soil by feeling it to determine if the plant needs water; if wet, don't water. Some plants like the soil constantly moist while others need to go dry before watering again. Check each plant's requirements to determine when to water. Watering a plant a little each day causes salt build-up from fertilizer and results in poor root development.

Reduce the risk of over-watering plants by growing them in containers with drainage holes which allow excess water to drain. Pour off excess water or fill the saucer with pebbles to collect the water and keep the pot high and dry. Also, the soil dries out faster in an unglazed clay pot, helping reduce risk of over-watering.

Underwatering can also cause leaf edges to turn brown. Wilted and limp leaves may mean the soil is too dry. Check soil moisture often. It is best to water a plant before it wilts to avoid injuring it.

Pot-bound houseplants are more susceptible to brown leaf edges. The soil in a pot-bound houseplant is filled with roots, reducing the amount of water the soil can hold. Increase the watering frequency or repot the plant into a container one or two inches larger in diameter which reduces the need for water. Check the soil to determine how often the newly transplanted houseplant needs water. It will be easy to over-water the plant because of the new volume of soil added.

Over-fertilizing causes leaf browning. In general, fertilize plants every one to three months with a water-soluble fertilizer. Fertilize plants more often when they are rapidly growing or after pruning. Less fertilizer is needed when it is not rapidly growing. Check the fertilizer

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label and needs of the plant to develop a schedule. A water-soluble, complete fertilizer containing nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium is recommended for most houseplants.

If over-fertilizing is a problem, a white crusty layer of salt is seen on top of the soil or on the edge of the pot. Leaching the soil washes out excess fertilizer. To do this, water the soil until the excess runs out the bottom of the container four times in one hour. Then water the plant as needed and wait one to two weeks to see if this procedure has stopped further browning of the leaves. To help prevent a buildup of salts, avoid over-fertilizing and water the plant thoroughly each time by letting water run out the bottom of the container.

Consider lack of humidity indoors, especially in winter. Watch for the drying effect of heated air that blows from the furnace in winter and air-conditioned air in summer. Plants can be placed on a tray of pebbles with water or use an air humidifier or vaporizer to increase the humidity.

For more information about growing houseplants, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

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Annette's Tip:

The fourth season of Horticulture Webinar Wednesdays is over and recorded for your viewing pleasure. All of the gardening topics presented in last four seasons are available at Kentucky Hort News.

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