

Plant care for the transient

By BETH CALHOUN
Focus Editor

One of the easiest ways to end your plant's life is to force it to pull up roots and move to school without taking steps to ease the transition.

Otherwise, your begonia may end up pushing up daisies.

"You have to think about where you had your plants before and try to put them in an identical situation," says Marihelen Kamp, a lecturer in the Horticulture Department.

And never place them near heater or air-conditioning vents, she warns.

One of the two most important things to remember about keeping your plants from taking the deep-six is to check lighting. Do they have the right amount

and kind of light?

"You might think it's pretty bright in here," she says, pointing around her fluorescent lit office. "But it's only about 100-125 foot candles. Most plants need 150-500."

After you get the light right, water is next on the list.

But the water in this area has a high sodium content. And "letting the water sit over night will not remedy this problem," Kamp says.

But you can water successfully with all this salt if you do it properly.

And properly means leeching — but not the kind in "African Queen." This kind means letting the water run completely through your plant for a minute or two.

A white deposit on top of the soil is salt. And if you have this, it means you aren't leeching properly — the salt isn't getting washed out of the soil.

When you've changed the location of your plants, watering may also have to be changed, Kamp says, due to lighting and humidity changes.

Less light, less water and vice-versa.

The most common problem with water is too much water, Kamp says. One of the first symptoms of over-watering is rotting.

"Your plant will start to turn black at the base and the rot will gradually creep up the rest of the plant."

A good item to invest in is a water meter, which checks the amount of moisture in the soil. If you do use one, be sure to



Boston Fern

place it near the roots because that's where moisture counts.

But a meter isn't a necessity, she says, if you check moisture correctly with your finger. Again, check near the roots. Even though you plant may look dry, it may be very moist around the roots.

Every other time you water, Kamp says, it's a good idea to use a diluted fertilizing solution.

Almost any houseplant fertilizer is good enough, she says, like the ones sold in grocery stores.

Potting soil is another matter, though. Don't go dig up some soil from your backyard to re-pot with, and expect your plant to grow well, Kamp says.

"The soil around here is called Lufkin Fine Sandy Loam. But it's more like concrete."

It's not necessary to use rocks at the base of your soil for drainage. "It's better to use a pot with a good drainage hole," she says.

And to help with drainage, potting soil usually has perlite or vermiculite or styrofoam pellets mixed in. They're the little white granules you see in the soil. They break up peat moss.

Another thing to remember when re-potting is that the roots may need to be pruned. If they look really thick, Kamp says, simply take a knife and cut off a portion of the root system — just trim off from the bottom.

But you must also trim off the top of your plant, too. When root hairs are trimmed, your plant loses a capacity to take in nutrients, she says, so it must be balanced out.

One warning signal to look for is color. Some plants having difficulty adjusting may turn light green or yellow. But, Kamp says, it's difficult to diagnose a plant, because the symptoms are the same for so many problems.

As before, Kamp recommends, check the watering and lighting first. If they don't come around after that, try adjusting the fertilizer.

If one or two leaves turn yellow and fall off, Kamp says, don't worry.

"People get old and die and so do plants and so do leaves on the plants."

"Just one yellow leaf isn't a sign that the plant is dying. It may be just getting old."

Photos by Lee Roy Leschper Jr.



Split-leaf philodendron



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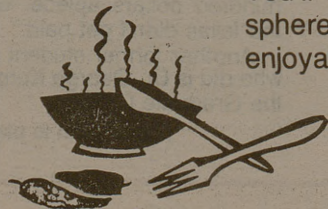
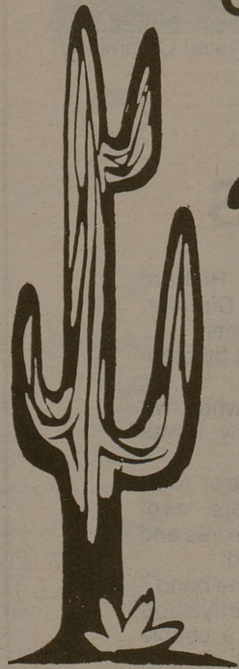
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