

Too much water kills houseplants

By PAMELA EADES
Battalion Reporter

Many houseplants don't need extreme environments like a South American jungle or an African desert to grow.

The most important thing to remember in taking care of houseplants is not to overwater them, said Dr. Edward McWilliams, a horticultural sciences professor.

"The number one killer of houseplants is water," McWilliams said. "Too much water will damage the root system and destroy the plant's ability to absorb water."

The leaves of a plant that has been overwatered may turn yellow and fall off, McWilliams said. The plant may dry out and wilt because it can't absorb water. The root system of the plant may turn black and give off a decaying odor.

"The plant will tell you when it needs water," McWilliams said. The plant will tend to wilt and there will be some slight change in color, McWilliams said.

McWilliams said the water in Brazos County contains dissolved salts harmful to some plants such as African violets and ferns. He suggested using rainwater or distilled water for these plants or leaching them periodically. Leaching is watering the plants more than normal to dissolve away salts.

Another common problem, especially in dormitories, is low light intensity. Most houseplants are specially adapted to withstand low light, but McWilliams said this depends on the type of plant. Flowering pot plants (chrysanthemums, geraniums) need more light than tropical foliage plants (dieffenbachia, philodendrons).

The leaves of a plant that is not getting enough light may also turn yellow and fall off. They will also appear more elongated. Plants may get variegation, or white spots, and the plants may seem greener in color.

These plants in a low light environment also require little fertilizer because they do not grow at a fast rate. McWilliams said the amount of fertilizer is related to the growth rate and these plants should need little.



Photo by Beth Gibson

Graduate student Tony Cerbone demonstrates the proper care and feeding of some common houseplants in the horticulture greenhouses on Spence Street.

Plants used in studies

Deserts, jungles simulated in greenhouses

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The tropical temperatures and humid atmosphere of South America and the hot, dry climate of African deserts are near the Corps' headquarters.

On Lamar Street, across from the Plant Sciences Building, these two environments and several others are maintained for plants in three greenhouses operated by different departments within the College of Agriculture.

The greenhouses are covered with a white shading compound that protects the plants from intense sunlight. Inside, the warm, moist atmosphere is punctuated with intermittent spurts of mist from a high-pressure watering system installed to imitate the plants' natural habitat of South America. Or a hot, dry climate simulates the conditions of an African desert for succulent plants like cacti.

Each greenhouse is divided into smaller rooms to keep different plants at different temperatures and light intensities.

Tropical foliage plants, such as ananas, require low intensity light, while chrysanthemums and flowering pot plants need a higher intensity light to grow, said Dr. Edward McWilliams, a professor of horticultural sciences at Texas A&M University.

McWilliams, a researcher for the Texas Agricultural Extension Station, said temperature, light intensity, media (the type of soil the plant is grown in) and the amount of water a plant is given are all interrelated. As the light intensity goes up, McWilliams said, the temperature

will rise. This will cause an increase in the transpiration rate, or water loss. How much more water the plant needs depends on the media used.

The amount of water a plant needs to grow also differs between species.

A fern growing in the same environment as a cactus might need up to four times as much water as the cactus, McWilliams said. Aroids, such as dieffenbachia and philodendrons (tropical foliage plants) also do not need as much water as ferns, he said.

Another tropical foliage plant, maranta, is the subject of an experiment by McWilliams and other Texas A&M scientists trying to toughen plants so they can survive in colder temperatures.

McWilliams said the research is being conducted to enable commercial growers to ship plants without worrying about chilling damage caused by low temperatures. He said the ability to withstand cooler temperatures could also lower the cost of plants because growers would be able to cut heating expenses.

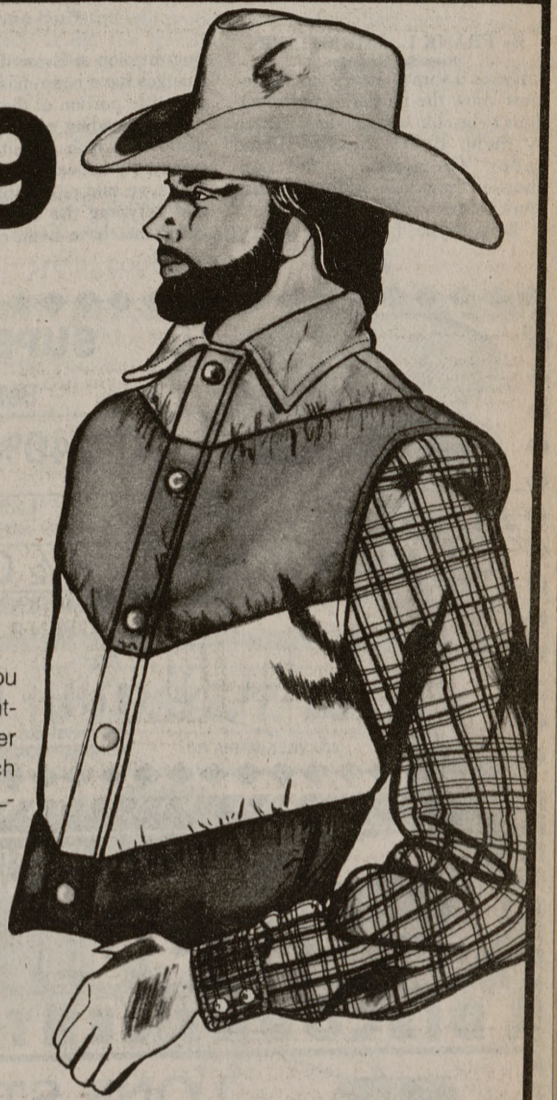
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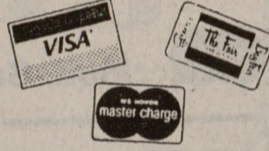
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