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For more information, contact Jesse Gilmore  
Horticulture Agent, Wildcat Extension District  
[jr637@ksu.edu](mailto:jr637@ksu.edu), (620) 724-8233

## **Are you Killing your Houseplants with Kindness?**

Houseplants brighten up any living space during the winter, but their health can turn on a dime for the most random reasons. There are four houseplant health variables that you can control – temperature, humidity, light, and water. Temperature is relatively easy to change – most houseplants want a daytime temperature between 65 and 75 degrees and a night temperature between 60 and 65 degrees, which can be easily accomplished with your furnace. However, plants should not be placed where they can touch windows, or in front of heating vents. Windows can be drafty, and warm air flowing out of the vents can decrease humidity.

Humidity, or the amount of water in the air, is lowest in the winter – around 10%. Houseplants need a humidity between 40 and 50%. Without a humidifier, you will not achieve this, even with misting. Therefore, it's important to select species that can thrive in lower humidity, like cacti, kalanchoe, snake plant, and philodendron. Light is harder to achieve in the winter with shorter days, and if you don't have a south-facing window, you will have to rely on indirect light or artificial lights. Most plants will need at least 8 hours of light a day, but most plants are also going to need darkness as well. Keep in mind that most plants will slow their active growth during the winter, so light and water are not as important as temperature.

One of the easiest mistakes to make with houseplants is overwatering. Because the growing environment is cooler, it takes water longer to evaporate out of the pot and out of the plant. Keeping the potting media wet for too long creates the potential for root rot. You can tell when a houseplant has too much water when the entire plant starts drooping. Underwatering will instead be present as leaf curling. The amount of water each houseplant needs will vary based on species. On either extreme of the watering spectrum are succulents and ferns. Ferns require consistent soil moisture, but not saturation. Succulents require barely any moisture, and the potting media should dry out completely before watering again. Most houseplants should be watered again when the potting media is just barely moist.

Sprucing up ailing houseplants typically means adjusting one or more of the previously mentioned variables of temperature, humidity, light, and water, but you might also be able to bring your houseplants back from the brink with a small application of slow-release fertilizer. Fertilizers are the nutrients plants need to survive, and the majority of fertilizers will have at least one of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium. If your plants are having issues with the foliage and stems, nitrogen will be the most important nutrient. However, plant growth slows considerably in

the winter months. Just as with water, it's important to not overfertilize houseplants, and to use a slow-release fertilizer like Osmocote. These fertilizers will release their nutrients a little bit at a time and not overwhelm the root system of the plant, meaning that the plant will use the nutrients more efficiently, saving you money and keeping the roots healthy.

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