



November Plant Care Tip Moving Indoor Houseplants Back Inside

It is that time of year for avid gardeners to be looking at their indoor plants for health concerns. Traditionally indoor gardeners use this "quiet time" in the gardening industry to take a good look around the house at their plants. They have either spent the growing season outside under a tree or on the sunny deck, or simply placed around the comforts of home.

November is a down time for outdoor gardening in Vermont. All of the annuals have been pulled, the perennials have been trimmed back for the winter, and the window boxes have been dumped and stored.

What do we look for when preparing our foliage and flowering plants for a long winter in Vermont? Depending if your plants are traditionally moved outside for the summer months or not, it's always best to scout the entire group of house plants for insects and diseases first, before returning inside. The fact that these plants may have been tucked under a foliage canopy or place directly in the full sun may be a benefit to them during the growing season, but can be detrimental during the fall months, prior to bringing them inside the house.

An example of problem areas that can arise is if your Ficus Tree is placed under a canopy of foliage outside. Prior to returning it to its winter home, check for Spider Mites, Mealy Bugs, or other plant damaging insects. Placing a plant outside creates opportunities for problems. Most of the plant material (woody ornamentals, perennials and annuals) have a tendency to attract insects, thus creating problems when you place indoor plants out for the summer and then bring them inside at the end of the season.

Trimming your plants will not only provide stimulus to produce a flush of new foliage, but will allow you to reduce any population of insects by about 30%. In simplistic terms, most insects are "sucking" the sweet juices that are produced in the tender portion of the plant (new growth). Trimming the plant back by a third will not only stimulate new lateral development, but help control the insect population at the same time. This will make it easier for you to reduce or eliminate problems inside your home.

Insects amongst your indoor plants can be a significant problem, especially in the winter months. It is very hard to treat insect and diseases when the outside temperatures don't

allow for you to relocate your plants to a well ventilated area prior to spraying an insecticide or fungicide. Most people reason with the theory that maybe it's best to "leave well enough alone" and don't use any chemicals in and around the home for to protect the environment. Living with a few bugs may be ok for a while, as long as it doesn't get out of hand.

If you did choose to use some type of control or preventative application, try using a non-aerosol, pump-style Safer Insecticidal Soap (Potassium Salts of Fatty Acids). This is commonly used to control Mealy Bug, Spider Mites, Whitefly and other harmful insects. There is also a Systemic Houseplant Insecticide granular (containing the chemical Imidacloprid) that can be applied to the soil of plants that works well as a preventative to insects; possibly not so well once the problem exists though.

Once again, scouting for insects is a great way to identify problems before they get out of hand. In another year, take a few minutes in the latter part of August to look for problem areas. A few moments during this time will help immensely in the end to fight off critters. The summer months are a good time to take advantage of open air applications that may keep your plant healthy all year long.

The same theory can be applied to any fungal problems that may exist on your plants. It is very common to have fungus on the soil in the fall months, when the nights are cool and the soil may remain wet for longer periods of time. Again, simple techniques such as removal of the top ½ inch of soil from the surface may help prevent bringing these problems into your home. Air circulation and dry soil can help deter those symptoms with little effort. Keeping your soil on the drier side during the cool winter months is best for your plants. Following these simple techniques may result in fewer problems in the end.

Fertilizing your plants during the winter months may not be as necessary as that during the growing season. It is generally recommended that the best time to use just clear water when watering is from November until March. The uptake of water in houseplants during the cooler weather slows considerably unless wood heat or forced hot air. Plants that are flowering or heavily root bound though may require a little nutrition during the cooler months to keep the foliage greener and the root system stable. It is best to wait until the early spring season if a plant is root bound and in need of transplanting to a larger container. Transplanting into a larger pot during the fall/winter months allows for over watering and may lead to troubles down the road, so leave that for a late winter project. Simply, a once a month application of fertilizer that is well diluted on heavy feeding house plants, such as Hibiscus, is probably best. Do not over fertilize during these months as this can be detrimental to your plants. You can resume your fertilizer program in early March to keep plants healthy and in bloom.

Hopefully these helpful hints will allow you to keep your houseplants in healthy tip-top condition. Remember, taking a few minutes every few months to scout for problems is the best way to identify and treat plants that are in need. The winter months provide great opportunity to add a little color to your window sills so keeping plants healthy and thriving will give you the color and enjoyment that you strive for!