

# Indoor Plants

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Indoor plants add a pop of natural colour and texture and an outdoor ambiance that can't be matched. Add air-purifying abilities, and they become a must-have décor for every room in your home!

## What makes a good indoor plant?

- One with shade adaptations like dark green or mottled, often thin leaves. These plants make the most of the little light they receive; light passes through the leaves and bouncing back up off those below, giving the plant a second chance to absorb the light.
- Evergreen foliage
- Non-toxic
- Tolerant of neglect and a little abuse – knocked into by dogs, slept on by cats, and often moved around by the homeowner.
- Copes with a wide range of temperature variations and watering regime from under- to over-watering.
- Can grow roots and grow from damaged offshoots – and here, *Crassula* and *Gasteria* stand out.
- Succulent-type leaves or leaves making them water wise.

## Indoor conditions:

What are the light levels in each room? Before automatically ticking the shade box, look again at the variations in light around the room. Generally, indoor light varies between dark (internal corners, corridors, rooms with small windows), to brightly lit levels, and even sun for a short time. Sun beating in through glass can burn shade-loving leaves though. When grown indoors, plants often shed the adaptations that protect the leaves from an overload of solar energy, so if moved suddenly into a sunny area – onto the patio for a stint, or when the low winter sun streams in through the window – the indoor sun will burn the leaves. If you want to move a plant outdoors again, tuck them into a shaded spot for a few days to let them toughen up.

As with outdoor life, indoor conditions, like air moisture and temperature, change between seasons which influences how much water a plant needs. Air-conditioners, heaters, and fires, push temperatures up a few notches, but also remove humidity from the air, and can leave plants thirsty.

### TIP:

*Heading into winter: are any sensitive plants close to a window? They could suffer from frost burn. Move them further into the room or against a warm, west- or north-facing wall.*

## Planting:

Use a nutritious potting mix that drains well to prevent roots drowning in a sodden soil. [Click here to read the best way to plant up a container.](#)

## Managing Plant Health:

Plants have varying water and food needs, so maintain your collection based on their individual needs rather than giving a collective watering, for example. Forest species enjoy constantly moist and a humus-rich soil so require a food boost and more regular watering than those from drier habitats, and even partial to dappled shade situations. In addition, keep in mind the plant's growing and dormant seasons; they require a winter or summer rest as much as their outdoor siblings.

Try not to move the containers as plants adapt to their conditions.

## Watering regime:

More plants die from over-watering than from under-watering.

### TIP:

*Deep-rooted shrubs can usually last longer between watering sessions than shallow-rooted groundcovers.*

### Guidelines:

- Non-succulent plants: Once or twice a week in summer. Reduce this during the plant's dormant season according to each plant's needs. Up the amount during a summer heat wave and air-conditioner use, and in winter when using heaters and fires.
- Succulents and bulbs: once every 2 weeks.

### TIP:

*Summer rainfall regions: Many sites suggest you begin reducing watering in autumn, and this relates to outdoor as well as indoor container plants. However, plants start winter preparations as far back in summer; those that flower in spring start forming buds in autumn, so reducing the amount of water they receive can affect flowering the following spring. Too little autumn watering can also lead to leaf drop which limits the nutrients the plant can store through winter for use as the growing season begins. Dry soils are not as effective as moist soils in insulating the roots, plus, fine roots die off and biological activity lessens as soils dry out. Reverse this advice in winter rainfall areas.*

## Gauging how much water to give:

Just enough to prevent excess seepage through the drainage holes. When planting, do not fill the soil level with the top of the container. Keep the soil level a few centimeters below the lip of the container as it makes watering a lot easier, reducing spillage and allowing you to give enough water to the pot-bound plant.

Salt build-up is often an issue with container plants particularly when containers are under-watered or over-fertilised, and high evaporation can increase salt levels in soils. Salts can pull water away from the roots making the plant's internal irrigation system less effective; counter this with deep water flush three times a year. Pour water into the container until a steady stream runs out of the drainage holes.

## Feeding:

Foliar fertilisation (spraying leaves with a liquid food) of houseplants is a popular practice but can cause problems. Some nutrients, iron, for example, become immobile once they have entered a cell, and so will not move on to other parts of the plant where they are needed. And foliar feeding does not provide the plant with anywhere near the volumes of some nutrients like nitrogen that are required in large quantities. So foliar fertilisation is not a substitute for soil feeding that enables the plant roots to uptake all the nutrients they require.

As roots are restricted to the soil conditions within a small area, frequent feeding is important. Some gardeners add a liquid food with each watering, but quantities must be well controlled to prevent over-fertilising the soils. Organic liquid food is effective; follow instructions on the packets, but watch your plants for any signs of nutrient deficiencies and amend quantities until you find the optimum level.

Remove old, dead leaves and branches, and spent flowers.

Wipe the dust off leaves: Rain showers keep leaves clean and healthy; indoors, they require wiping down with a soft cloth every couple of weeks. Misting leaves is also effective with the added benefit of increasing the humidity around the plant.

## To purify the air:

Aside from beautifying a room, there are many physical health benefits provided by indoor plants, including better indoor air quality by the removal of airborne pollutants.

A few indigenous species also work to remove dangerous toxins from the air, something with which Kloof/Hillcrest residents are aware of as we battle toxic air conditions that are off the chart because of a badly managed local refuse dump. Paints, furniture, cleaning supplies and even building materials themselves also contribute to the build-up of VOC, volatile organic compounds that easily evaporate to gaseous form at normal temperatures. Not every gaseous compound is harmful, but at high enough concentration, some of them can lead to allergies and dizziness, and illnesses that are even more serious. There is no single plant that absorbs everything; include a variety of these plants for a fresher, healthier home.

- *Chlorophytum comosum* - *Hen and Chicken*: One dense plant in 60 m<sup>2</sup> room is enough to perform as an air filter, releasing oxygen and absorbing carcinogens like formaldehyde and styrene, and carbon monoxide. It decomposes benzene and nicotine in tobacco as well. The leaves grow quickly and help to absorb harmful substances like mold and other allergens, so it is the perfect plant for those who have common dust allergies. This species is lightning fast at removing VOC's from the air.
- *Clivia species*: One adult plant can absorb one litre of air and release 80% of oxygen overnight. Even with doors and windows closed, Clivia can adjust the air make it fresh.
- *Adiantum species*: Our Maidenhair Ferns: absorbs 20 micrograms of formaldehyde per hour, and it is considered the most effective natural cleaner.
- *Sansevieria aethiopica* & *Sansevieria hyacinthoides*: : One of the top air purifying plants identified by NASA, Sansevieria removes at least 107 known air pollutants, including carbon monoxide and nitrogen monoxide, formaldehyde, chloroform, benzene, xylene, and trichloroethylene among

many others. *Sansevieria* also produces copious amounts of oxygen throughout the night, making it an excellent plant to keep in the bedroom.

- *Crassula ovata*: Pulls a range of toxins and air pollutants from the air including acetone. Position in bright light.
- *Portulacaria afra*: pulls a range of toxins and air pollutants from the air including acetone. Position in bright light.
- *Dracaena aleytriformis*: one of the most effective plants to take up acetone, a chemical commonly found in nail polish remover. Plants can deal with extended dry periods between watering.

## INDOOR PLANT LIST

### TREES & SHRUBS

For best results, place the container in bright light but not direct sunlight. Water well every 10 days or so, and add an organic liquid feed every second watering. Hold off on feeding through the dormant season. All plants will cope with common indoor light levels; those that handle darker shade are labelled as such.

*Aloe pluridens*: translucent, bright green leaves allow this shade aloe to thrive in low light conditions.

*Baphia racemosa*: able to tolerate deep shade

*Buxus natalensis*: able to tolerate deep shade

*Curtisia dentata*

*Deinbollia oblongifolia*

*Dracaena aleytriformis*: deep shade

*Encephalartos villosus*: Deep shade. This ground cycad needs a large space, at least 2 m x 2m.

*Gardenia thunbergia*: deep shade

*Mackaya bella*: deep shade

*Mitriostigma axillare*: deep shade

*Podocarpus latifolius*: bright light but not direct sunlight

*Sparrmannia africana*

*Strelitzia reginae*

*Tabernaemontana ventricosa*: deep shade. Give the spreading canopy some space to grow.

### CLIMBERS

Climbers can grow quite rapidly indoors and will need pruning to prevent them getting out of hand. All do best if given a supporting trellis.

*Aloe ciliaris*

*Ceropegia* species

*Crassula pellucida* subsp. *marginalis*, *Crassula spathulata*

*Senecio macroglossus*

### PERENNIALS

*Asparagus densiflorus* 'Meyersii'

*Chlorophytum comosum*

*Cyperus albostriatus*: deep shade

*Plectranthus* species: deep shade

*Plectranthus ambiguus*, *Plectranthus ciliatus*, *Plectranthus ernstii*, *Plectranthus oertendahlii*, *Plectranthus saccatus*, *Plectranthus verticillatus*

*Pelargonium tongaense*: shade to bright light

*Streptocarpus* species; member of the famous African Violet family so popular in homes around the world.

In particular, look for

*S. caeruleus*, *S. prumulifolius*, *S. polyanthus*, and the Cape Primrose, *S. rexii*.

## BULBS & ORCHIDS

*Ansellia africana*

*Clivia* species: deep shade

*Clivia gardenii*, *Clivia miniata*

*Cyrtanthus elatus*

*Dietes bicolor*, *Dietes butcheriana*

*Drimiopsis maculata*

*Haemanthus albiflos*

*Ledebouria socialis*

*Scadoxus membranaceus* & *S. puniceus*

*Veltheimia bracteata*

## FERNS

*Adiantum* : best in moist, humid conditions like bathrooms. *capillus-veneris*

*Microsorium punctatum*

*Rumohra adiantiformis*

*Selaginella kraussiana*: best in moist, humid conditions like bathrooms.

## SUCCULENTS

Using succulents has saved many a forgetful gardener as their water wise characteristics and ability to regrow from a broken stem make them such easy-care indoor plants. Just as long as you give them sufficient light and warmth. Succulents enjoy well-drained, sandy to gravel-like soils. Not all plants within this category need bright light; *Gasteria*, *Haworthia*, *Sansevieria* and *Crassula* species, are all shade-adapted plants. Use miniature species in small pots on windowsills, or group them together on a side table. Choose a variety for a tapestry arrangement in a large, saucer-style container.

*Aloe aristata*, *Aloe variegata*

*Crassula arborescens*, *Crassula expansa* subsp. *fragilis*, *Crassula multicava*, *Crassula pellucida*,

*Crassula setulosa*, *Crassula streyi*

*Delosperma rogersii*

*Faucaria felinia*, *F. tuberculosa* and *F. tigrina*

*Gasteria* species

*Haworthia* species

*Sansevieria aethiopica* & *Sansevieria hyacinthoides*