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Plants for every window

Whether your windows face north, south, east or west, you can fill them with colorful flowering and foliage plants that will grow and thrive. The key to growing attractive houseplants is to select plants that will thrive in the amount of light you have available.

Most plants won't die the minute they are placed in a window that is too dark, but without the light they need to produce food they will literally starve to death. Such plants will slowly lose old leaves and produce smaller new ones, and as time goes on will become tall and spindly. If you match the plants you grow to the amount of light you have available at your window, and observe a few basic cultural practices, you will be well on your way to a window garden that will grow and thrive not only from month to month, but from year to year.

The first step in deciding how much light your window garden receives is to determine which way the window faces. Use a compass if necessary. North-facing windows receive the least amount of light, south the most. East and west windows receive roughly the same amount, although west windows tend to be hotter than east windows.

You must also consider how much actual light finds its way through your windows. The glass itself cuts down on light, even when the windows are sparkling clean. If your window is heavily shaded by trees, curtains, nearby buildings or a porch roof or awning, the amount of light will be reduced considerably. Curtains, even sheer ones, can effectively turn a west window into a "north" one.

If you have an unusually dark window, or a dark corner that cries for a plant, consider purchasing two identical plants recommended for a north window. Rotate the plants between the dark spot and a bright window on a weekly basis.

Supplemental lighting is another solution. Suspend a fluorescent fixture over the spot where you want the plant, and use one cool-white and one warm-white tube to provide a wide spectrum of light. Attach a timer so it will turn on and off automatically. Most plants will appreciate at least 12 to 14 hours of supplemental light per day.

Another way to provide additional light is to reflect it onto plants. White walls will reflect more light than dark ones, and a well-placed mirror can reflect a great deal of light onto plants in a room.

The amount of light available to a plant diminishes quite rapidly as you move away from a window. Place plants as close as possible to a window without touching it. If they need to be more than two feet from an east or west window, choose a species recommended for a northern exposure.

Avoid placing plants directly on top of radiators or heating ducts. Dust on leaves cuts down on the amount of light a plant receives. The misting used to raise humidity levels around a plant doesn't wash off much dust. A better solution is to regularly give your plants a brief shower. For large plants, tie a plastic bag around the pot, covering the soil as much as possible (so it doesn't wash away), and set the plant, pot and all, in the shower under a gentle stream of tepid water for several minutes. Small plants can be rinsed in the sink. In the summer, plants can be moved outside and sprayed with a gentle stream from the hose.

Regular showers also help with insect control by washing away insects before an infestation gets started. Most can be washed away with a gentle rub. Use a soft brush for hairy-leaved plants. If you see evidence of an infestation, wash the leaves with a weak solution of white soap (one or two tablespoons to a gallon of water) with a soft sponge. Select your plants according to the amount of light you have available, don't neglect the basics of good culture — proper watering, humidity levels, fertilizing and soil conditions — and you will be well on your way to houseplants you can enjoy for years to come.

Here are some examples of houseplants that prefer light from the:

- **NORTH** — Asplenium nidus (bird's nest fern), Maranta leucournea (prayer plant), Zebra plant (Zantedhaea sp. 'dumb cane').
- **SOUTH** — Pelargonium sp. (geranium), Aloe barbadensis (medicinal aloe), Crassula argentea (jade plant) and Brassica arborescens (Hawallian shellflower).
- **EAST** — Nephrolepis exaltata (Boston fern), Oxalis (oxanrock), Cissis rombolia (grape ivy) and Clivia minnata (kaffir lily).
- **WEST** — Ficus elastica (rubber plant), Monstera deliciosa (cut-leaf philodendron) and Chamaedorea elegans (parlor palm).

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