

village view

by Andrea Leonard

Part I of Two Parts

Although it may seem too soon to think about frost, we all know it's coming. There's a hint of it early in the morning, and when we walk the dog before turning in for the night, a jacket feels good.

All summer long we've enjoyed the garden flowers and outdoor plants. Many house plants summered outside or on the patio, soaking up lots of humidity and sunshine. They've flourished.

But well before frost, before the heat comes on, is the time to bring house plants inside to accustom them to the different light conditions and the drier air they'll live with 'til summer comes once more.

When you bring plants inside, be sure they're free of disease and insects for one sick plant will infect them all. Sometimes it's wisest to start with a fresh batch of house plants each fall.

Many houseplants survive with too little light and humidity; for best results most require good light and fairly high humidity. Moderate humidity is also good for furniture and books, and enables people to feel comfortable at lower temperatures as well; if your plants are healthy, chances are you will be too.

Dozens of different plants will grow indoors: some are chosen for their attractive foliage, others for their flowers. This week we will talk about foliage plants, and next week about flowering houseplants.

The commonest foliage plants are Chinese evergreen, Begonia rex, Eoleus, Dieffenbachia, Dracena, Peperomia, Philodendron, Sansevieria, Spiderwort (wandering jew), ferns and ivies.

While each plant does best if its individual requirements for sunlight, water and humidity are perfectly met, most will adjust and grow in satisfactory fashion given adequate light (or protection from too much) and proper watering.

Chinese evergreen will grow without soil in a bottle of water. It will also grow in damp humus soil. In either case it should be protected from full sun; light from a north window is ideal. Night temperatures of 65° and daytime temperatures of 80° produce best growth. Supplemental heaters may be necessary during the day.

Begonia rex should be planted in humusy soil, rich with sphagnum moss. Soil should be kept moist and well-drained. Light and heat requirements are similar to those of Chinese evergreen.

Coleus produces colorful foliage if given plenty of sun. Plant in regular potting soil and don't overwater. Pinch tips of branches frequently to induce branching, and do not allow flowers to form. Propagate from cuttings rooted in water.

Dieffenbachia needs a chance to dry out moderately be-

tween waterings, thrives in indirect bright light, warm temperatures and low humidity.

Dracenas grow slowly and like wet soil, indirect sunlight, and low humidity. Both Dieffenbachia and Dracenas are good choices.

Peperomia tolerates neglect and will rot if over-watered. Allow its regular potting soil to dry moderately between waterings. Grow in indirect sunlight, warm temperatures and low humidity.

The average house provides almost perfect growing conditions for philodendron, which is intolerant of temperatures below 60°. All forms of this species - and there are many - like moderate moisture but will survive occasional drying out. They should be kept from direct sunlight.

Philodendron leaves should be washed several times a year and pinching back straggling growth encourages branching.

Better known as snake plants, Sansevieria grow in almost any environment. Plant in regular soil and allow to dry out between waterings. It's not fussy about light conditions, survives most temperatures above freezing, and has no special humidity requirements.

Wandering jew is among the easiest house plants to grow. Pot in regular soil mixture and keep moist. Grow in indirect sunlight, moderate temperature and humidity. The foliage of the several types is pleasantly varied, all may be propagated from tip cuttings and all branch freely when pinched back regularly.

Ferns are among the most satisfactory of house plants and offer a wide variety from which to choose. Among the best for potting are maidenhair, sword, birdsnest, spider, and house holly. Plant in humus soil and keep moist. Ferns like subdued sunlight, warm temperatures and high humidity. Protect from sudden chilling and when growing new fronds, give extra water.

Like ferns, ivies are excellent houseplants. Some of the best are the smaller-leaved forms with many varieties of leaf shapes and colors. German ivy trails and its flowers resemble tiny lavender snapdragons. Grape ivy both climbs and trails with coiling tendrils.

A baffling plant to me is Swedish ivy. Either it outgrows its pot completely and threatens to drive me out of house and home, or it slowly withers and dies. Sometimes it appears to adore all the sun available; other times sunlight seems to shrivel it. It's a heavy feeder and does best if given a balanced fertilizer and gets pinched back when it becomes over-abundant.

Ivies do well in regular potting soil, kept moist; they like full sun, cool temperatures, and low to medium humidity.

Plants that tolerate low humidity do well in conditions usually found in heated homes, but this may be too dry for many plants. There are several ways to raise humidity for those needing damper air.

You may keep such plants where household humidity is highest; the kitchen, particularly above the sink, is normally more humid than the rest of the house.

As a rule, the air surrounding groups of plants is damper than around a single plant. Or set plants above a tray of gravel, sand or peatmoss that is kept wet. Plants needing high humidity grow best in a greenhouse or terrarium.

If you tend to forget to water your plants, or to over-water them, try double-potting, which will supply water to the plant through the sides of the pot. Because the soil in double potted containers dries slowly, watering frequency is not as critical as when plants are grown in pots exposed to the air.

Put the plant in a porous clay pot and set this clay pot inside a larger watertight container. Fill the space between containers with peat moss or shredded sphagnum moss. Water both soil and moss. The moss holds the water and supplies it, through the clay pot, as needed.

When watering any plant from the top, be careful not to wash soil away from the plant's crown and avoid getting water on the crown; it might cause it to rot.

Next week the subject of this column will be flowering house plants and their care and feeding. Now that fall is here and winter's coming, we'll want green growing plants inside the house to brighten the wintry scene.