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INDOOR PLANT CARE.

# The Houseplant Troubleshooting Quick Reference

Diagnose what's wrong in 10 seconds.  
Fix it without killing the plant.

Cited against ASPCA · Missouri Botanical Garden · NC State Extension · UC IPM

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# The 10-Second Diagnostic

Most plant problems trace to one of five causes. Find the symptom in the left column, follow it across to the first likely fix, then turn to the matching page for the full treatment.

Symptom you see	Most likely cause	Turn to
Yellow leaves (lower / older)	Overwatering	Page 02
Yellow leaves (entire plant fading)	Insufficient light	Page 02
Brown crispy leaf tips	Tap water minerals or low humidity	Page 03
Brown edges, leaf still soft	Underwatering or sunburn	Page 03
Wilting with wet soil	Root rot (serious)	Page 04
Wilting with dry soil	Underwatering (easy fix)	Page 04
Tiny flying gnats around soil	Fungus gnats	Page 05
Fine webbing on undersides of leaves	Spider mites	Page 05
Sticky residue or honeydew on leaves	Scale or mealybugs	Page 05
Stretched stems, small new leaves	Insufficient light	Page 07
Soft mushy stems near soil	Root or stem rot	Page 04
Leaves curl inward	Underwatering or pest pressure	Pages 04, 05
No new growth in months	Dormancy or insufficient light	Page 07

**Rule of thumb:** if you cannot decide between two causes, lift the pot. Damp/heavy = watering issue. Light = light issue. The diagnosis lives in the pot.

# Why Are My Leaves Yellow?

Yellow is the most common houseplant symptom and the most over-diagnosed. Match the pattern, then act.

Lower leaves yellow, soft, soil wet

**Cause:** Overwatering. The roots have started to suffocate.

**Fix:** Stop watering. Let the top 2 inches dry completely before the next watering. If the plant came out of a self-watering pot, dump the reservoir. If yellow leaves persist after 2 weeks of corrected watering, inspect the roots for rot (dark, mushy).

Lower leaves yellow, soil dry, plant otherwise firm

**Cause:** Natural shedding. Houseplants drop one or two old leaves per month as they push new growth.

**Fix:** Do nothing. This is healthy. The plant is reallocating energy from old leaves to new ones. If 4+ leaves go yellow in a week, switch to one of the other diagnoses.

All leaves pale, plant looks washed out, no new growth

**Cause:** Insufficient light. The chlorophyll is degrading because there isn't enough sun to maintain it.

**Fix:** Move closer to a bright window (east or south-facing). New growth will come in darker green within 4–6 weeks. Skip fertilizer until the plant is in the right light — fertilizing a light-starved plant burns the roots.

Yellow with crispy edges, water runs straight through the pot

**Cause:** The plant is severely root-bound. Roots have taken over and there's no soil left to hold water.

**Fix:** Repot one pot size larger (1–2 inches in diameter, not bigger). For step-by-step species guides see [indoorplantcare.com/plants/how-to-repot/\[plant\]](https://indoorplantcare.com/plants/how-to-repot/[plant]).

# Why Are My Leaves Brown?

Brown means tissue death. Once a section is brown it doesn't recover — but you can stop new damage.

Brown crispy tips, mostly on calathea, spider plant, dracaena, peace lily

**Cause:** Fluoride or chlorine sensitivity from tap water.

**Fix:** Switch to filtered, distilled, or 24-hour-rested tap water. The damaged tips won't reverse, but new growth will come in clean within 4–6 weeks. Optionally trim the brown tip following the leaf's natural taper — never cut straight across, it looks artificial.

Brown edges, leaf still firm, dry soil

**Cause:** Underwatering. The plant is pulling water from leaf edges to keep the core alive.

**Fix:** Water thoroughly until water runs from the drainage holes. If the soil pulled away from the pot sides, bottom-water for 20 minutes to rehydrate evenly. Reset to a normal schedule.

Brown patches in the middle of leaves, often near a window

**Cause:** Sunburn. The leaf was in direct hot sun.

**Fix:** Move 2–3 feet away from the window or add a sheer curtain. Sunburn damage is permanent on the affected leaves, but new growth will be fine. Most popular houseplants want bright indirect light, not direct.

Brown tips combined with crispy curling edges, indoor air dry

**Cause:** Low humidity — especially in winter with forced-air heat.

**Fix:** Tropicals like calathea, fern, anthurium, and alocasia want 50–70% humidity. A cool-mist humidifier in the same room is the only thing that reliably raises ambient RH. Pebble trays raise humidity by 1–3% (negligible).

# Why Is My Plant Wilting?

Wilting is the plant losing turgor pressure in its cells. The cause is in the soil — check it before you do anything else.

Wilting with bone-dry soil, leaves bouncing back when watered

**Cause:** Simple underwatering.

**Fix:** Water thoroughly. Most plants will recover within 24 hours. If the soil is so dry it repels water (forms a crust on top), submerge the entire pot in a sink of water for 15 minutes to fully rehydrate.

Wilting with soggy soil — the soil is wet but the plant looks dead

**Cause:** Root rot. Wet soil suffocated the roots and they started decomposing.

**Fix:** Unpot the plant. If roots are dark, mushy, and smell rancid, trim every rotten root with sterile scissors back to healthy white tissue. Repot in fresh dry soil with extra perlite. Skip watering for a week. Survival odds depend on how much healthy root remains. Some plants will not recover.

Wilting with normal soil moisture, plant on a windowsill, weather suddenly hot or cold

**Cause:** Temperature shock — usually from cold draft, AC vent, or moving the plant outside.

**Fix:** Move away from the temperature stressor. Most plants recover in 1–2 weeks. Tropicals don't tolerate temps below 55°F or above 90°F for long periods.

Sudden droop, brown soft spots at the base of stems

**Cause:** Stem or crown rot. Fungal infection from the base up.

**Fix:** If caught early, cut affected stems all the way back with sterile shears. If the central crown is mushy, the plant likely cannot be saved — propagate any healthy cuttings and discard the parent.

# The 4 Houseplant Pests to Recognize

Three of these can be fixed at home. One requires throwing out infested soil. Match the visual signs to the right pest, then apply the first treatment.

Pest	What you see	First treatment
<b>Fungus gnats</b>	Tiny black flies hovering around the soil surface; larvae in damp topsoil.	Let soil dry out 2 inches down between waterings. Apply Bti (Mosquito Bits, sold at any garden store) per label. Add yellow sticky traps to catch adults.
<b>Spider mites</b>	Fine white webbing on undersides of leaves; stippled silver/tan dots on the leaf surface; leaves later turning yellow and dropping.	Shower the entire plant in lukewarm water, paying attention to leaf undersides. Then spray with insecticidal soap or 70% isopropyl alcohol diluted 1:1 with water. Repeat every 5 days for 3 weeks (full mite life cycle).
<b>Scale</b>	Small brown or tan bumps along stems and the central veins of leaves; sticky honeydew residue below the plant.	Scrape off visible scales with a fingernail or soft brush. Treat the whole plant with horticultural oil or insecticidal soap. Inspect weekly for 6 weeks.
<b>Mealybugs</b>	Small white cottony tufts in leaf joints, on stems, and at the base of leaves; honeydew residue.	Dab each visible bug with a Q-tip soaked in 70% isopropyl alcohol — kills on contact. Spray the plant with insecticidal soap. Inspect weekly for 6 weeks; mealybug eggs hide in soil.

**Quarantine new plants for 2 weeks** before placing them near your collection. Most infestations enter the home on a plant from a nursery or a friend's cutting. Two weeks is enough time for hidden eggs to hatch.

# How Often To Water by Species

Schedules are a starting point, not a rule. Always check the soil first. Wait until the top 1–2 inches are dry, then water thoroughly until water runs out the drainage hole.

Plant	Spring–Summer	Fall–Winter	Note
<b>Pothos</b>	Every 7–10 days	Every 10–14 days	Forgiving. Yellow leaves = overwatered.
<b>Snake plant</b>	Every 14–21 days	Every 3–4 weeks	Rot risk. When in doubt, wait.
<b>ZZ plant</b>	Every 2–3 weeks	Every 3–4 weeks	Stores water in rhizome. Drought tolerant.
<b>Monstera</b>	Every 7–10 days	Every 10–14 days	Wants slightly dry between watering.
<b>Philodendron (vining)</b>	Every 7–10 days	Every 10–14 days	Similar to monstera.
<b>Spider plant</b>	Every 5–7 days	Every 7–10 days	Fluoride-sensitive. Use filtered water.
<b>Peace lily</b>	When it droops	Less frequent	Tells you when it's thirsty. Recovers fast.
<b>Rubber plant</b>	Every 7–10 days	Every 10–14 days	Yellow lower leaves = overwatering.
<b>Fiddle leaf fig</b>	Every 7–10 days	Every 10–14 days	Hates inconsistency. Set a routine.
<b>Jade plant</b>	Every 14–21 days	Every 3–4 weeks	Succulent. Soak thoroughly then dry out.
<b>Calathea / prayer plant</b>	Every 5–7 days	Every 7–10 days	Evenly moist, never soggy. Filtered water.
<b>Boston fern</b>	Every 4–5 days	Every 5–7 days	High humidity. Wants consistently moist soil.
<b>Anthurium</b>	Every 7–10 days	Every 10–14 days	Wants high humidity (60%+).
<b>Alocasia</b>	Every 5–7 days	Every 10–14 days	Goes dormant in winter — water less.
<b>Succulents / cacti</b>	Every 14–21 days	Every 4–6 weeks	Soak-and-dry. Never mist.

# Decoding Light Requirements

"Bright indirect" is the most misused phrase in plant care. Here's what each term actually means and where to put each plant.

Term used in care guides	What it actually means	Example placement
<b>Direct sun</b>	Sunlight hits the leaves with no obstruction for 4+ hours/day.	On a south-facing windowsill, or right next to an east/west-facing window.
<b>Bright indirect</b>	Bright room but the sun doesn't hit the leaves directly — diffused by a sheer curtain or 3+ feet from the window.	3–6 feet from a south window; right next to a north or east window.
<b>Medium indirect</b>	Bright enough to read comfortably, no direct sun ever.	Across the room from a window, or near a north-facing window.
<b>Low light</b>	Dim — would not want to read without a lamp.	Interior rooms, hallways, far corners of north-facing rooms.

## Quick Light Match

Light you have	Plants that thrive there
<b>Direct sun (south window, no curtain)</b>	Succulents, cacti, jade plant, croton, ponytail palm, rosemary.
<b>Bright indirect (3–6 ft from south window)</b>	Monstera, fiddle leaf fig, rubber plant, pothos, philodendron, spider plant, calathea, anthurium.
<b>Medium indirect (north or east window)</b>	Pothos, philodendron, peace lily, spider plant, ZZ plant, snake plant, prayer plant.
<b>Low light (interior, no window)</b>	ZZ plant, snake plant, cast iron plant, pothos (will survive but slow growth).

# Going Deeper

Every diagnosis in this reference is cross-checked against primary horticulture sources — no influencer hearsay. The full per-species guides live on [indoorplantcare.com](https://indoorplantcare.com).

## Free Tools on [indoorplantcare.com](https://indoorplantcare.com)

- **Plant ID by Photo** — upload a leaf photo, get the species, pet-safety status, and the matching care guide. Powered by PlantNet.
- **Light Meter Calculator** — measure your window light to match the right plant.
- **Symptom-by-Species Library** — "why is my [plant] [symptom]" diagnostic for 100+ species/symptom combinations.
- **Pest Identification Guide** — visual ID for every common houseplant pest plus first-line treatments.
- **Pet Safety Checker** — every plant's ASPCA toxicity status to cats, dogs, and humans.

## Most-Read Care Guides

[Monstera Care Guide](#) · [Pothos Care Guide](#) · [Snake Plant Care Guide](#) · [Fiddle Leaf Fig Care Guide](#) · [Humidity for Indoor Plants](#)

## Primary Sources Cited

- ASPCA Poison Control — Toxic & Non-Toxic Plants Database. [aspcapetcare.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control/toxic-and-non-toxic-plants](https://aspcapetcare.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control/toxic-and-non-toxic-plants)
- Missouri Botanical Garden — Plant Finder. [missouribotanicalgarden.org/plantfinder](https://missouribotanicalgarden.org/plantfinder)
- North Carolina State University Extension — Plant Toolbox. [plants.ces.ncsu.edu](https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu)
- University of California Integrated Pest Management Program. [ipm.ucanr.edu](https://ipm.ucanr.edu)
- University of Florida IFAS Extension — Gardening Solutions. [gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu](https://gardeningsolutions.ifas.ufl.edu)
- Iowa State University Extension — Yard and Garden. [yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu](https://yardandgarden.extension.iastate.edu)

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