Houseplant Needs Differ In Winter

Light and temperature requirements for houseplants differ in winter. They are commonly grouped as those that require full sunlight, those that can tolerate lower light intensity, those that need as cool a temperature as possible, those that need to be in a room where the lights are not turned on at night and those that need a winter rest.

Plants of the cactus and succulent family prefer full sunlight. Place in a south-facing window in winter. Exceptions to the rule are aloe-like succulents and ox tongue. Place these plants in bright light but out of direct sunlight. Water infrequently (once every 1-2 months) to keep them from shriveling. In late winter or spring, begin watering more frequently. Do not mist the leaves and repot only when essential.

The Christmas cactus produces brilliant flower in the winter. Grow in filtered sunlight. Cool temperatures induce this type of cactus to flower. As a succulent, it thrives in an east-facing window with moist soil. Keep it on the dry side in the fall while the plant induces budset. As it begins to bloom, increase the water and stop fertilizing.

Foliage plants like philodendron, peperomia, rubber plants, ferns, and dieffenbachias have low light requirements. Their light requirements can be partially satisfied if they are placed close to a table lamp and away from a window for a period of time. Then move back to indirect light source if they become pale or spindly. Well established plants tolerate poor light better than plants still developing a root system.

Fuschias, geraniums, impatiens, and many begonias require full or filtered growing in a cool room. Avoid these houseplants if your home is warm and dry over the winter. Surprisingly, these plants do well in a room without heat over the winter.

Some plants prefer a winter rest. Gloxinias, amaryllis, and tuberous begonias belong to this group. Withhold water completely during their dormant stage except when the soil becomes powder dry. This dormant stage may begin anytime from December on. The plants don't need to be in the light while they are resting.

Rex and cane-type begonias that rest should be watered just enough to keep them from shrinking. Again, resume watering when they show signs of new growth.

Resembling a small Christmas tree, the Norfolk Island Pine withstands any amount of light. Indirect light is preferred. Water sparingly in winter and turn frequently to induce symmetrical growth. Mist and protect from drafts.

Late Fall Is Good Time To Bat-Proof House

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — Late fall or early spring — after bats enter caves to hibernate — is a good time to bat-proof your attic, according to wildlife biologists in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences.

"By sealing holes in your attic now, you can prevent bats from re-entering your house next spring," said Gary San Julian, professor of wildlife resources. "Also, this time of year, you don't have to worry about sealing bats inside."

The bats that live in houses, the little brown bat and big brown bat, once roosted in hollow trees. But after early settlers wiped out large tracts of forests, these "house bats" moved their roosts into hot attics, which act as incubators for their growing pups.

Although people often aren't thrilled about sharing their living quarters with bats, bats make good neighbors. One little brown bat can eat 600 mosquitoes per hour, and big brown bats eat many agricultural pests.

"If you see bats flying around your neighborhood at night, they're doing you a great service," said wildlife biologist Margaret Brittingham. "They're catching a lot more insects than that bug zapper you have out back. They also help us to reduce our use of insecticides."

If you're not sure if bats are sharing your domain, San Julian suggests looking for bat droppings in your attic. Bats make dry black droppings the size of rice grains, filled with shiny insect wings. If you find large accumulations of bat droppings, you probably house a summer maternity colony — a roost where female bats gather to raise their pups.

Because house bats have only one or two pups each year, protection of maternity colonies is important for their survival, said Brittingham. Destroying just one maternity colony can have a long-term impact on the population of both bats and insects in a local area.

So what should you do if you find yourself with these guests? First look for areas in your attic where bats can get through. Bats enter through spaces where joined materials have pulled away. They often get through louvered vents with loose screening, roof peaks, dormer windows or areas where flashing has pulled away from the roof or siding. Bats can crawl through holes the size of a quarter.

To cover louvered vents or large gaps and cracks, use window screening or hardware cloth. Fill smaller cracks with expanding foam insulation or caulking compound.

"When bat-proofing, timing is crucial," said Brittingham. "Never seal holes May through July, because you can trap the females and their pups inside."

After sealing your attic, Brittingham suggests providing a bat box near your house as an alternative roost. "Bats are very site-faithful," she says. "They tend to come back to the same place year after year. With a bat box, the bats still have a safe place to raise their pups, and you get the bats out of your house — while still benefiting from their insect control."

The small bat boxes available at garden centers serve mostly as bat motels. "During the summer, while females are gathered together in maternity colonies, males are basically single, flying around," Brittingham explains. "When you put up a small bat box, often you'll get a male bat using it for a night or two, then moving on."

To provide housing for maternity's colonies, homeowners should build their own bat boxes. These boxes are larger, holding from 100 to 300 bats. The interior should be divided into multiple roosting crevices, and the design should allow for proper incubation temperatures. "Sitting also is important," says Brittingham. "The most successful bat boxes get at least seven hours of sunlight each day."

For more information about bats and bat-proofing, as well as detailed instructions on building bat boxes, see the Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences publication, "A Homeowner's Guide to Northeastern Bats and Bat Problems." Single copies are available free of charge from your county Penn State Cooperative Extension office, or from the College of Agricultural Sciences Publications Distribution Center (call 814-865-6713).

The 23-minute video "Bat-free Belfries: A Guide to Bat-Proofing" also demonstrates how to deal with a single bat or colony of bats in a building, and explores the role of bats in northeastern ecosystems. You can borrow the video from your local county extension office. To purchase the video, contact Ag Information Services, The Pennsylvania State University, 119 Ag Administration Building, University Park, PA 16802; phone (814) 865-6309; FAX (814) 863-9877. The price is $35. Allow three weeks for delivery. Make checks payable to Penn State or include a purchase order.