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Houseplant care through the eyes of an interior landscaper

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Littleton Garden Club

Who cares for those beautiful giant trees, plants, and flowers in malls and office complexes? Interior landscaping companies often do. Their training and expertise allow them to manage the day-to-day needs of plant material and handle pest management and design changes. My experience as a retail manager of an interior landscape company taught me simple routines to care for my own houseplants.

Most of my houseplants (e.g., Cactus, Dracaena, Pothos, Areca Palm, and Norfolk Island Palm) are in plastic grow pots with drainage holes in the bottom. Those pots are placed inside decorative planters, and sphagnum moss is used on top of the soil at the pot

edge to retain moisture and hide the growing pot inside. Based on their specific sunlight needs, I situate each plant near a window and routinely check that roots haven't become pot-bound.

I trim faded blooms from flowering plants each week to encourage more blossoms and remove yellow, brown, or withered leaves. Sharp scissors make clean cuts without tearing the plant stems. It's always a good idea to wipe the scissors with rubbing alcohol before moving on to a different plant. This practice helps to avoid spreading pests and diseases. Rotating plants a quarter turn every week prevents them from leaning into the sunlight. Firm leaf surfaces can be cleaned gently with a paper towel to improve photosynthe-

sis and appearance.

Adding short green fencing at the base of taller plants deters our two overly curious cats from digging and investigating. Plastic saucers inside each decorative planter retain water and should be checked for excess standing water. Cork mats provide extra protection for our floors or furniture.

Each plant's water need is best determined by placing a finger into the soil to a depth of one or two inches. Most plants are content with weekly watering and require just enough to saturate the root ball. Exceptions to this rule include flowering bulb plants like the amaryllis, which may need more water during rapid growth cycles. Cactus, on the other hand, never likes wet feet.

Houseplant leaves are known to show you their

water needs. Here are some rules: yellow lower leaves usually mean the plant needs more water than it received, and brown leaf tips typically mean too much water was given. If you remove the yellow or brown leaves and adjust the watering, the plant's health should improve.

Fungus gnats are tiny black flies that buzz around the soil or near your face. They are a common houseplant pest that appears when plants are over-watered. Allow the soil surface to dry between watering sessions, and remove any dead leaves from the soil surface. Yellow sticky cards may be used to monitor and catch such pests. Developing easy routines can help us all become green thumbs around our houseplants.