Announcer:

The Missouri State Journal, a weekly program keeping you in touch with Missouri State University.

Emily Yeap:

Houseplants not only beautify an indoor space, but they also freshen up the air and help to boost your mood and even reduce stress levels. I’m Emily Yeap.

What are some easy houseplants to look after and key things to keep in mind when caring for houseplants? Dr. Clydette Alsup-Egbers, associate professor of environmental plant science at Missouri State University, joins me today to explain.

Dr. Clydette Alsup-Egbers:

I have found that it’s a family called Araceae family, the aroids. They are native to tropical environments so the light level’s pretty low and it’s similar to what most people have indoors. So, some of the examples, Chinese Evergreen, Peace Lily, Heartleaf Philodendron, or any of the philodendrons, there’s one called Syngonium, Devil’s Ivy. Those are all pretty easy and reliable. They're considered hard to kill.

Emily Yeap:

When it comes to house plants, start by putting them in the right place.

Dr. Clydette Alsup-Egbers:

If you’re not familiar with a certain houseplant, do just a little background research on it to find out where it grows best. If you’re buying from a garden center, ask them. They usually have pretty good information as well.

Emily Yeap:

It's important to groom houseplants often.

Dr. Clydette Alsup-Egbers:

That just means remove any dead or dying or yellow leaves. While you’re doing that you should check for insects because that can be a big problem. So, if you do find any little pests, I like to use an alcohol solution, about 10% alcohol and water, and just spray it on those insects. I did that because of anecdotal evidence from years ago where people would talk about, they would get a Q-tip, put it in alcohol and then rub for the insects to try to kill them. So, it’s easier just to spray in on with a spray bottle.

Other than that, dust them once they are accumulating dust, so that they photosynthesize better and just look better. Fertilize with very slow release. So, if a fertilizer says put “x” number of teaspoons, I would about half that.

Plants tend to grow when they’re indoors especially they grow toward the light source, which is the window. So, every week, or few weeks, whatever your schedule permits, turn those plants a quarter turn so they don’t just start leaning always toward the window. It's just a better upright appearance.

Emily Yeap:

It's also a good idea to provide a source of humidity because humidity levels are lower indoors.

Dr. Clydette Alsup-Egbers:

Things like putting a tray with pebbles and then putting your plants on top of that can be very helpful. A stockpot of water on the stove or using humidifiers indoors. Don't try to just spray the plants with water because you would need to be doing that practically every moment of the day to have much effect. Kitchens and bathrooms, if the lighting is sufficient, usually have higher humidity than other rooms.

Emily Yeap:

How much should you be watering?

Dr. Clydette Alsup-Egbers:

I tell students to stick their finger in the potting mix and if it is dry down to about an inch, or maybe your first knuckle, that’s usually time to water. You want to water until water comes out the holes in the base of the container, and then if that’s in the saucer after you’ve watered, you want to remove that by emptying the saucer. Sometimes if it’s a big plant I use a turkey baster to get the extra water out of the saucer.

Lift the pot. If the pot feels heavy, it probably doesn’t need water. If the pot’s light, it likely does need some water. And then just color of that, we call it soil but the potting mix is a good indicator. A darker color means there’s more moisture in the mix than a lighter color.

Don't overwater. The one thing I stress is more plants die from overwatering than anything else indoors, so it’s better to underwater than overwater if you have to make a choice.

Emily Yeap:

In terms of repotting, hold off unless the plants are root-bound.

Dr. Clydette Alsup-Egbers:

If you see visible roots, and especially if they are spiraling around the inside of the pot, that’s called root-bound. You can root-prune those, so just cut off some of the extra roots, add some more potting mix back into the pot and replace the pot, water it and that’s it.

Emily Yeap:

Alsup-Egbers highlights a few common issues with houseplants.

Dr. Clydette Alsup-Egbers:

When they aren’t the normal color a healthy plant is. They’re often a lighter green that could mean often things like either overwatering or underwatering. When you get spots on them, you might have a disease problem. Not as common as the insects but it does happen. You can sometimes cut off those spots or sometimes you need to spray like a fungicide if it’s a fungal disease.

Plants that are growing in the same pot for too long, that can be a problem. Sometimes you want to re-pot it to a slightly larger pot. I have known people who have inherited plants from funerals or from relatives and they’ve had these for years and years and they never fertilize, and they keep wondering, “What’s wrong with my plant?” Well, it could be it just needs some fresh potting mix and to be fertilized.

Emily Yeap:

If you’re looking to buy some houseplants, check out the upcoming Darr College of Agriculture’s annual Plant Sale. It's scheduled from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. May 5th-6th in Karls Hall on the Missouri State campus. I’m Emily Yeap for the Missouri State Journal.

Narrator:

For more information, contact the Office of Strategic Communication at 417-836-6397. The Missouri State Journal is available online at ksmu.org.