

# Preparing Houseplants to Move Indoors



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## Adaptation to Indoor Conditions

Some tropical houseplants can be damaged when temperatures drop below 50° - 55° F. It is time to begin preparing houseplants that have spent the summer outdoors to move back inside for the winter. Just as they needed to adapt to outdoor conditions, houseplants need to become acclimated to indoor conditions.

Indoor light is very low compared to sunlight. Outdoors, heavy shade is less than 25% of available light, but indoor conditions considered “high light” receive less than 10% of available light. Low light conditions have as little as ½% as much light as outdoors. Help plants adjust by reducing light levels gradually over a period of about a week. Move plants from sun, to light shade, to heavy shade, and finally indoors. Try to match the indoor light conditions as closely as possible to those outdoors. Bright, but indirect light is ideal for many plants. Artificial lighting may help. Even with gradual adaptation, plants may develop some leaf yellowing or drop as it adjusts to lower light.



If we experience cold nights with warm days, and your plants have not had time to adjust to lower light levels, bring the plants indoors for the night and put them back out in the morning. It is best to move houseplants inside when outdoor and indoor temperatures are similar.

Lower light and temperatures result in a slowing of plant metabolism. Do not fertilize houseplants between October and April because the plants will not be able to use the nutrients. Water requirements also diminish greatly indoors. Let the soil dry considerably before moving plants indoors, and wait until the soil is only barely moist halfway down in the pot. Water sparingly; it is better for houseplants to be too dry than too wet. Many plants can tolerate periodic slight wilting, but a moisture meter or your finger is the best way to check the soil moisture level.

It is best to wait for spring to repot plants as the new soil will likely remain too wet indoors. If the plant must be repotted, try to take it outdoors on warm days to give the soil a chance to dry. If the plant is too big to transplant, remove the top two inches of soil and replace with fresh potting soil.

It is important to bring plants in before the furnace is turned on. Plants that require high humidity, such as ferns, will struggle in dry air. Increase the humidity in the home or room with a humidifier. If this is inadequate or impractical, place humidity-loving plants on a saucer filled with gravel and water. Do not allow the water to touch the base of the pot. Even with this level of care, a few leaves may brown at the tips and fall off as the plant adjusts to the new environment.

## Pest Control

Insect pest populations may explode indoors once natural competition and predation are removed. Begin by closely inspecting plants for any unwanted hitchhikers. Take them out of their pots to see if anything has crawled in through the drainage holes. This is especially important if the pots sat on the ground outdoors.

Heavily bug-ridden plants are best discarded. Plants with minor infestations may be treated before bringing them indoors. Be sure to keep plants that had any sign of insects away from other houseplants, even after treatment. It is far easier to prevent an indoor outbreak than to try to bring one under control.

Even plants that appear to be bug-free should be cleaned. Wash the leaves and stems with a brisk stream of water. Allow to dry, and then spray the entire plant (including upper and lower surfaces of leaves), soil and pot with an insecticidal soap safe for people and pets. Leave plants outside for several days, and then reapply insecticidal soap. Take plants indoors two to three days later.

Some pests are difficult to control with soap. Systemic houseplant granule containing disyston may be added to the soil a week or two before moving plants into the house. This product is absorbed by the plant and provides better control against scale, mealybug, spider mites and soil-dwelling insects. Do not use systemic insecticides on plants you plan to eat, or on plants that children or pets may decide to munch on.



Houseplants brought in for the winter often become a source of annoying black gnats that resemble fruit flies. These are fungus gnats, and they live on minute particles of fungus that grow in potting soil that has been over watered. Let houseplants plants dry until the soil is barely moist halfway down the pot between waterings to avoid this problem. Once established, fungus gnats may be able to adapt to the proper dry conditions. Systemic houseplant granules should solve the problem. Pesky adults can be trapped on a sticky yellow card placed horizontally near the infested plant. The problem should disappear in a few days.

Continue to closely monitor your plants for several weeks so that developing problems can be treated before they spread to healthy plants. Quarantine plants under treatment away from unaffected plants, and wash your hands thoroughly after handling infested plants. Avoid brushing against plants as pests may be transferred by clothing.