

## **You can't take the tropics out of the plant**

Most houseplants/indoor plants originated in tropical areas. The environment inside our homes is not the environment these tropical plants prefer.

In their native tropical environment humidity is much higher than it is in a home or office. Indoor lighting is often less than optimal. And the fairly even temperature, both day and night, inside most buildings is not ideal for indoor plants.

These factors present challenges for plant enthusiasts attempting to maintain reasonably attractive plants in an indoor environment.

Humidity inside most homes is lower than plants prefer. Average humidity indoors is well below the preferred 40 to 60 percent. Lower humidity causes plants to lose water through their leaves faster than they should.

You could install a humidifier, which will add several gallons of water to the air each day. But is it worth the cost to satisfy a few tropical plants? A less expensive option is to place potted plants on a two or three inch bed of moist gravel contained in a shallow, water proof tray, pan or similar container. Add water as needed but make sure pots on gravel beds are not sitting in water. Misting the foliage with water may help but you'd have to mist so often that it really is not practical.

The portions of the visible light spectrum that are most useful for plant growth are blue and red. Sunlight contains these and all other rainbow hues. Plants located in a dark room where they receive little or no sun need a combination of supplemental light. Blue is produced by fluorescent lamps and red by incandescent bulbs. Plants that receive some sunlight each day may only need extra blue light from a fluorescent source. Too much red light may stimulate undesirable leggy growth. It's important to maintain the proper balance.

Bringing a plant indoors after it has been accustomed to outdoor light can result in the plant dropping leaves. If possible, gradually move the plant from high light to low light locations. This allows the plant to gradually adjust. This can be tricky. The plant will let you know if you got it right.

Most plants grow best if nighttime temperature is lower than daytime temperature. Most plants do well when the temperature is about 65° F to 70° F during the day and about 10 degrees lower at night. Scientists have found that a slightly higher daytime light intensity will help compensate for the lack of temperature variation for many plants, though.

So, to make those indoor plants feel at home this winter try to provide a little bit of the tropics. Good luck.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, November 6, 2008