

Bringing Houseplants Back Indoors

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Although we're about a month away from our first expected frost, it's never too early to start thinking about bringing houseplants back indoors. Most houseplants should return inside before the temperatures reach 45 degrees; tropical plants should be indoors before temperatures hit 50 degrees.

Houseplants that have been outdoors all summer have gotten used to the high light levels. Coming back indoors, even to a sunny south-facing window, is going to feel like going into a cave. To minimize the stress of being relocated to a lower-light environment, move potted plants to areas where they get partial- to full-shade, especially in the afternoon. After a week or so in the shade, they'll be more likely to survive indoors without losing all of their leaves. Try to provide your houseplants with similar light levels to where they spent the summer. Full-sun plants should be placed in large, south-facing windows. Those that spent the summer on shady decks can be placed in north- or east-facing windows.

Your houseplants have probably put on a lot of growth over the summer, both tops and roots, so repot them before bringing them indoors. Repotting is also a great way to avoid bringing ant colonies or other pests into your home. If you are reusing containers, be sure to scrub them with soap and water beforehand. Use new potting soil; never reuse old potting soil or garden soil. Be sure the container has adequate drainage holes. Place the containers on top of trays or saucers that are filled with pebbles: this way, excess water drains away from the roots.

Check your plants carefully for hitchhiking pests before bringing them indoors. Be sure to examine the undersides of the leaves and along the stems. Treat pests with the appropriate products: insecticidal soap (NOT dish detergent) does a great job against spider mites, aphids, and whiteflies. If you had decided against repotting, then soak your plant in a bucket of lukewarm water, up to the top of the pot. Any ants, snails, or worms will be forced to the surface.

Annual landscape plants should not be dug up and moved indoors, because they rarely survive. Instead, take cuttings of them now. Inspect the cuttings as above for mites, etc. Easy-to-root plants, like coleus and mint, can be placed in a cup of water and allowed to root over a week or two. Other annuals can be rooted in containers of moist sand or vermiculite. Once well-rooted, they can be transplanted into small containers of potting soil. In the spring, repot them again and move them outside.

Avoid overwatering indoor plants. Often, the soil surface will look dry while the soil lower down is still moist. When deciding whether to water, stick your finger into the pot, about 1 inch down; if it feels dry at that depth, go ahead and water. Add enough water for excess to flow out of the drainage holes.

For more information on houseplants or other gardening questions, please contact the Purdue Extension Service at (812) 435-5287.