



Trowel Talk!

November, 2015

Winter's "in" crowd

It has been several weeks since I brought my house plants indoors to overwinter. Once they adjusted to my dry and drafty old farmhouse, I had to think about how to look after them properly. How will I get them through our long winter? What care and attention do they need to make it through to spring?

Our plants' cultural problems are defined by where we place them indoors and how we treat them. Problems include over- and under-watering, cold water watering, sunburn, drafts from windows and heating vents, temperature fluctuations and dry indoor conditions.



Crassula ovata, or Jade Plant, enjoys spending the summer outdoors. They are a long-lived plant and are often handed down in the family.

Using natural rainwater to water plants would be ideal but they do tolerate tapwater. I am fortunate to have rainwater and occasionally catch melting snow from the roof in a bucket on warm days. Plants prefer water that is at room temperature. Watering with cold water is detrimental when

the droplets splash on the leaves and cause marbling. But in situations of low humidity, spraying the foliage with a fine mist of tepid water can help.



Schlumbergera truncata, or false Christmas cactus, rewards you with a full flush of blooms after spending the summer outdoors

It is always important to ensure that any surplus water sitting in the saucer is poured away after 20 minutes so the plant roots don't become waterlogged. A plant that has been overwatered is under great stress because its roots are drowning in soggy compacted airless soil. It will look very unhappy and have wilted leaves which may lead you to think it needs water. In my learning days of caring for houseplants I lost a few to overwatering and found a moisture tester was most beneficial. I still use this when in doubt and am often surprised to see from the arrow indicator that there is still adequate moisture in the soil and no more water is needed yet. An overwatered plant may be saved by removing it from the pot, allowing the root ball to dry out for a few days and then re-potting.

Certain plants are prone to sunburn when exposed to direct sunlight. Light levels increase as the angle of the sun changes, so it is important to check that plants are still protected from too much sun on their leaves by moving them further back from the window as necessary.



Saintpaulia, or African violet, is a good example of a houseplant that has specific care requirements. They need good light, but not direct sunlight as their fleshy leaves will scorch in the heat. Choose a location near a window but not on the window ledge so the plant is shielded from the sun and from any cold draughts. Moisten the compost/soil thoroughly, but ensure that the pot is not left standing in water. It is important to water the soil, not the leaves, as droplets that sit on a leaf can also cause damage.

Delicate plants are very susceptible to drafts which can cause their leaves to drop off. They need a more protected location away from entrances and heating vents. Temperature fluctuations are a problem in winter, particularly for plants on window sills. If we lower the thermostat at night and raise it again in the morning, the rapid changes can be very stressful for plants. Keeping them at a constant temperature is the key.

Indoor gardening is a wonderful pastime, particularly during the winter months. It extends our gardening season. There is an enormous variety of houseplants available today, so choosing the right plant for the right location in your home shouldn't be difficult. There are many sources of information about caring for indoor plants.

You may discover that you like indoor gardening all year round!

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Retired Master Gardener

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Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton

Where to find us this month for free gardening advice!

ONGOING:

Telephone Help Line: 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1-3 pm (all year)

E-mail Help Line: mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca

- monitored daily

- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

CLINICS:

No clinics until spring.

SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

Lawn care and lawn alternatives – January 7 – 7:00 pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

Greely Community Centre, 1448 Meadow Drive, Greely

Hosted by the Greely Gardeners (Guest fee: \$2)



For information on arranging a lecture for your group: mgottawaspeakers@gmail.com

For more information on Master Gardeners, visit us at: <http://mgottawa.ca>

November TO DO List

- Watch the weather and once the ground starts to freeze, add the burlap or perennial cloth to the stakes that you put in earlier to wrap your trees for the winter to prevent desiccation from sun and wind.
- Continue to water trees and shrubs that were planted this year until the ground freezes. Even without their leaves, the roots are still storing water for the winter.
- Do one more 'walk around' check on the yard to ensure you've removed and stored all tender bulbs and that delicate ornaments are safely put away for the winter.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

Tip of the Month

We've all heard of (or perhaps tried to weed out) invasive plants; but what can gardeners do to make a difference in the battle to control non-native invasive plants?

First off, we can try to grow more plants that are indigenous to our region. You may need to do some research on this, as plant labels can be misleading. Is a 'North American Native' plant right for your garden? Finding out exactly where in North America it originates from will give you a better idea of whether it is truly a plant that is native to your area.



(Photo: Mary Ann Van Berlo)

Goutweed (*Aegopodium podagraria* 'Variegatum') shown escaping into a forest area and competing with native ferns and trilliums.

That is not to say we shouldn't grow plants from other regions – just that we should do so with caution.

Don't plant non-native plants near sensitive areas – wetlands, [alvars](#), forests, etc. These areas have their own unique flora and fauna that rely on each other. Allowing an invasive plant to spread into these sensitive areas (and choke out the indigenous plants) would reduce the habitat and food available in that ecosystem.

If a plant has a tendency to seed aggressively, deadhead it religiously so that it can't spread its seed. Or weed out seedlings before they become too large.

Ontario's current wild parsnip 'invasion' is a prime example of domestic plants run amok. The wild parsnip is the common garden parsnip that the pioneers brought with them as a food source. Some were left to go to seed and over the years have spread to become a problem.

If a plant has a 'running' root system, consider putting physical barriers in the soil to keep it in check. You will need to put the barrier deep enough to stop the roots and also allow the barrier to protrude above the ground to stop surface runners.

Don't move plants from the wild or bring them across borders. Aside from being illegal, it is not worth the

risk that you could be introducing an invasive plant or that the plant could be carrying an invasive pest or disease.



(Photo from FoodProduction101.com, used with permission)

Installation of a root barrier, shown as the backfilling is being completed

There is a vast array of resources available to help us minimize the invasion.

The Ontario Invasive Plant Council has a publication called "[Grow me Instead](#)" which offers native alternatives to some invasive plants. There are two versions of the booklet based on growing zone: Northern Ontario & Southern Ontario.

The [Canadian Wildlife Federation](#) also gives some pointers on controlling invasive plants in our own yards.

The Ontario government also has a program to control invasive species and they provide some tips on "[How you can combat invasive species](#)".