

Houseplants: Thinking Outside the House

By Claire McCaughey

Whether you have a large suburban yard or a tiny condo balcony as your outdoor space, houseplants can be a great addition to your summer garden. They often add a tropical feel as well as giving your garden a mature, lush look even early in the season. Outdoors in a beautiful glazed ceramic container or a simple terra cotta pot, a well-grown single houseplant makes a bold statement.

What exactly is a houseplant? Simply defined, it is a plant that is intended to be grown indoors. Many people are familiar with flowering tropical shrubs and tender perennials – well-known plants such as Hibiscus and Begonia, or lesser known ones like Clivia and Abutilon. Some of us have a foliage houseplant or two such as a fern, Sansevieria (aka mother-in-law's tongue) or Aloe. Fewer of us know that plants we think of as indoor plants grow well outdoors in the summer in the right conditions. They also look great.

Some houseplants even bring surprises when placed outdoors. Rain and sunshine can sometimes trigger flowering in plants that have never flowered. For instance, plants such as cacti and succulents (especially Aloe) as well as Clivia, bloom beautifully outdoors.

There are plenty of ways to incorporate houseplants outdoors. One of these is as a so-called specimen plant – a large single plant as a focal point near an entrance way or at the edge of a patio or deck. A large palm, for example, will look very striking in a beautiful container. Houseplant growth can be restrained by keeping plants in relatively small pots and not re-potting them too often. However, what started life as a small windowsill houseplant can get quite large after five or six years so you are limited by size with some houseplants as they eventually become too heavy to bring in and out each year.

Houseplants look great in groupings on a patio table or stand. Five or six cacti or succulents (such as Aloe or Echeveria) of different sizes and shapes in colourful pots provides interest. Putting houseplants with similar watering needs together also makes sense.

Using the “dropping-in” technique, houseplants in attractive containers can be placed on the ground in their pots in open gaps in the perennial garden to make it look lush as well as creating interest with height and colour.

While annuals provide ongoing colour in the outdoor garden because they flower for most of the season, some flowering houseplants can have this role too. Anthuriums (aka flamingo flowers) have vivid red or pink flowers (although the colourful part is not technically the flower). These plants will light up the garden with the intensity of that colour as well as their beautiful heart-shaped leaves.

Large flowering houseplant shrubs such as oleander or Hibiscus are often available now in spring nurseries as large “annuals”; however, they can be brought inside for the winter and kept for several years. Oleander will retain its leaves indoors while Hibiscus will shed some of them but continue to grow.

Some houseplants that can be just plain boring indoors (Sansevieria falls in this category) can look stunning outside due to their architectural quality. A large Sansevieria can be purchased at low cost and placed in a colourful or decorative pot. The simplicity of the tall straight succulent leaves contrasted

with the container gives a contemporary, clean look. Purchase houseplants in early summer in hardware stores, supermarkets and outdoor nurseries.

Caring for Your Houseplants Outdoors and Bringing Them In

Outdoor potted houseplants require similar attention as annuals in pots with regular watering, sometimes daily in hot weather, as well as fertilizing. Depending on the plant, a general-purpose houseplant fertilizer will work or one specific to cacti and succulents. Wait until plants have adjusted to the outdoors before fertilizing full strength – usually sometime in late May or early June. Even after they have acclimatized to outdoor conditions, not all houseplants do well in full sun. A part sun or part shade location is often best, especially for foliage plants. Flowering houseplant shrubs do need full sun to produce lots of flowers.

Houseplants require special care when they are brought indoors to remain healthy over the winter. Do not wait until the first fall frost warning. They need to be acclimatized to the indoors early, ideally before you turn on the furnace.

First though, carefully examine your plants for any potential hitchhiking pests. For foliage plants in particular, it's a good idea to gently hose the leaves on the top and undersides to wash off any pests.

SIDEBAR: Five Unusual Outdoor Houseplants

Some houseplants thrive outdoors in the summer putting out new foliage and flowering. They also stand up well to varied conditions including temperature fluctuations and heavy rain. The plants listed are also easy to propagate.

Clivia miniata is actually an evergreen bulb. It has beautiful strap-like leaves and orange or yellow flowers. It can often be purchased in florist shops in the winter. It flowers in the winter indoors and then again outside in the summer. This is a very long-lived plant that looks good in or out of flower. It can be divided in spring or fall. Part sun outdoors is preferred.

Foxtail fern (*Asparagus densiflorus*) is a tough, long-lived plant with a beautiful airy quality. The ferny stems have tiny white flowers followed by occasional red berries. It can be divided or grown from the dried seed in the berries. This plant grows well in full or part sun.

Flamingo flower (*Anthurium andraeanum*) requires a shadier location outdoors and regular watering. It also needs to be divided regularly in order to flower well. The flowers last a long time.

Orchid cactus (*Epiphyllum*) is similar to the more familiar Christmas cactus but much bigger. It has long succulent stems along which flowers will appear under the right conditions. It is not the best-looking plant out of flower but it is a show-stopper when in flower because the blooms are spectacular. It can be grown from cuttings.

Crown of thorns (*Euphorbia millefolium*) blooms almost all year round inside or out. Flower colour is typically orange or red with many small flowers. It takes full sun outdoors. It can be propagated from cuttings but let the cuttings dry out before putting them in soil. Also be careful of the milky white sap inside the plant that can cause an allergic reaction.



Anthurium, Orchid Cactus and Fuchsia grouped on a corner of the deck



Kangaroo Paw (*Anigozanthos*) in flower with Clivia, cactus and succulents

Photos by Claire McCaughey