



Four Fabulous Houseplants

Ready for a challenge? Although these houseplants are a little tricky, they are certainly worth the extra work! With a little attention and some tender loving care, this quartet will bring you a lot of joy...

araucaria heterophylla — norfolk island pine

Although the Norfolk Island Pine is often sold during the holidays, it is not a true pine but a tropical native from a small island in the South Pacific. While it can reach up to 200 feet in the wild, this slow-growing houseplant is available from tiny terrarium-size up to an upright, woody plant usually about 5 or 6 feet, developing a woody trunk and sturdy branches. To coach your smaller plant into a stately specimen, here are the essential requirements for *Araucaria heterophylla*:

Light: needs bright, indirect or filtered sunlight indoors, partial sun outdoors with protection from hot afternoon sun

Temperature: needs a cool room (60°-70°) during the day, slightly cooler at night; shield from drafts, changes in temperature

Water: needs consistent moisture, water regularly from spring to autumn, sparingly in winter; does not tolerate saturated soil – water when the top 1" of soil is dry in the summer, allow to dry completely before watering in the winter

Humidity: needs consistent 50% relative humidity indoors; use a humidifier and/or pebble tray; mist daily, using cool water

Feeding: from March to September use water-soluble fertilizer at ½ strength every two weeks; do not feed in fall and winter

Pruning: never cut the growing tips as there will be NO new growth from that point; only snip off any brown tips or dead branches since growth has already stopped there; rotating your plant regularly will result in the desired symmetrical form; to keep a dense, lush form it must have sufficient light as well as no fertilization during the winter

Repot: resents transplanting due to its fragile root system; repot every 3-4 years only if roots are growing out the bottom of the pot; use a deep pot and fast draining soil amended with sand or Turface

Trouble-shooting: leaf-drop and loss of lower branches is usually caused by hot dry air, lack of humidity or insufficient water; over-watering or allowing it to sit in water causes root rot and needle clusters will turn yellow and fall off easily; watch for mealy bugs and scale, use rubbing alcohol to clean affected areas or horticultural oil for large infestations

cupressus macrocarpa 'goldcrest' — lemon cypress

Lemon-scented in summer, glowing brightly with a delicate inner light, this conifer is often trained as topiary for indoor display. It tends to grow in spurts, takes well to pruning, and looks great grouped as a bright, feathery background for more colorful specimens. To make sure a *Cupressus macrocarpa* 'Goldcrest' stays healthy and vibrant, follow these particulars:

Light: needs at least five hours of sun, best with a south-facing window in winter; transition slowly to outdoor sun in late spring

Temperature: needs cooler room indoors (55°-65°); adapts well to summer heat and humidity outdoors if kept hydrated

Water: keep soil moist but not soaking wet; can dry quickly in pot – avoid excessive drying or plant may not recover; water more sparingly in winter when light is less intense

Humidity: mist foliage occasionally

Feeding: fertilize with a balanced formula every two weeks from April to September, once a month for the rest of the time

Pruning: maintain natural triangle shape or topiary form by clipping gently in spring; temporary browning on recently pruned tips is to be expected and will fade as the plant heals and grows

Repot: in the spring every 2 years if necessary

Trouble-shooting: very susceptible to aphids so check regularly; be vigilant about watering; transition carefully to outdoor site

gardenia jasminoides — common gardenia or cape jasmine

We often notice the scent of a gardenia before we see it, but the thick tactile flower petals and glossy leaves are undeniably fetching as well. Although there are over 140 species, *Gardenia jasminoides* is usually the species given as a gift (or just give it to yourself!) They can be tricky to keep healthy, especially indoors during the winter months, so here are a few guidelines:

Light: must have bright, indirect light indoors to set blooms and produce lush, healthy foliage but keep out of hot, direct sun; likewise during the summer months it is best to site in full morning sun with afternoon shade during the hottest weather

Temperature: to avoid bud drop, it's important to keep temperatures at 60°-65° during the night, 10° higher during the day; don't move outdoors until nighttime temperatures are consistently 50°-55°

Water: regular, routine watering is the key – inconsistency may cause the buds and leaves to drop off; in the summer let the top ½” dry out and then water thoroughly; in fall and winter, allow the top 1-2” dry out before watering, even if it is flowering

Humidity: demands consistent high humidity; using a hygrometer will help you to gauge the humidity in your house; maintain a relative humidity around 50-60% by using a pebble tray and a humidifier; spraying every day with room temperature water will help also, but avoid flowers as water causes the petals to discolor

Feeding: fertilize only during the growing season by using acid fertilizer once a month from March to August

Pruning: healthy new growth (and therefore more blossoms) will be encouraged by pruning out older, woody stems; to improve bushiness, clip just above points where growth-producing buds point outward rather than toward the center of the plant

Repot: likes to be root-bound, repot in spring every 2-3 years if necessary

Trouble-shooting: hard water, “cold feet,” lack of iron or too alkaline soil will produce yellow leaves – add chelated iron to soil and adjust the pH of the soil to keep it acidic; dry air will cause the blooms to drop; bud drop and black leaf tips are usually caused by changes in temperature or in amounts of water; aphids and mealy can be treated with insecticidal soap – heavier infestations and spider mites will require neem oil

medinilla magnifica — showy medinilla

With their spectacular, long-blooming flowers and lush foliage, Medinillas grab the attention of even the most jaded plant lover. This epiphyte is a native of the Philippines where it grows in the forks of large trees and its pink blooms make a very seductive display dangling over the edge of an eye-level shelf or high table. It can be a strong grower with proper care so to keep your *Medinilla magnifica* healthy and assure its rebloom, follow these directives:

Light: from November to the end of February it likes lots of light and can tolerate direct sunlight; from March to the end of November it's best to protect from direct sunlight or the leaves will burn; outdoors in the summer, screen from direct sun

Temperature: ideal temperature range is 63°-77°; wait until temperatures are consistently above 55° before taking outside

Water: prefers being a bit dry to being too wet; allow plant to dry out between each watering; best to water from the bottom by setting the pot in 2-3” of water, letting it soak for 10-30 minutes – the top of the soil should become fully moistened – and then letting it drain completely before returning it to the empty saucer; be careful not to let sit in water or to overwater

Humidity: thrives in high humidity – 50% relative humidity or higher; daily misting is beneficial, especially in winter

Feeding: do not fertilize when flowering; after the flowering period, use houseplant or orchid fertilizer every 2 weeks while it is growing new shoots; when new shoots are about 10” long, place in a cool environment (63°-64°) with bright light, continuing to feed; after about 10 weeks, when the flower buds are about 1” long, place in a warmer room and discontinue fertilizing

Pruning: if the plants get too large, you may prune them back right after flowering but never remove more than half of the leaves and make sure that at least one pair of leaves remains on each stem or the stem will die

Repot: if necessary repot every 1-2 years but not while flowering; use an open and porous potting mix

Trouble-shooting: yellowing of leaves and failure of buds to develop is usually due to lack of light or improper watering; if plant is kept too dry the flowers may drop and the stems will become limp and soft – the plant may survive when rehydrated but the flowers probably won't – merely remove the weak flower stems and wait for new buds to form; if kept too moist the stems and leaf tips may turn black – cut them off and withhold water; rarely susceptible to pests or diseases although overwatering can lead to root rot and mealy bugs