



Common Ailments of Houseplants

Sometimes houseplants do not thrive in our home as well as we would like. Usually the plant lacks proper care or environment. The abnormal appearance of the plant is the key to what is causing the problem. The following chart of symptoms, possible causes, and treatments will help you understand what is wrong.

	What's Wrong	Probable Cause	What to Do
#1	Leaves curl and wilt; stems become mushy and rot; soil in pot is usually wet.	Too much water	Water less frequently. Use pots with drainage hole in bottom. Do not allow pot to stand in water more than 30 minutes.
#2	Tips of leaves turn brown and wilt. Lower leaves turn yellow and fall off.	Not enough water	Water until some water runs out drainage hole in bottom or submerge pot in a pail of water for 5 minutes. Drain off excess water. Repeat when soil is dry to touch.
#3	Plants grow rapidly with lots of foliage but have few if any flowers.	Too much fertilizer	Fertilize less often or at half the suggested rate. Use low-nitrogen fertilizer during blooming season. Do not fertilize when plants are dormant.
#4	Lower leaves lose color and may drop off. New leaves are progressively smaller than last leaves. Stems are stunted.	Too little fertilizer	Fertilize regularly when plants are growing. Use a soluble fertilizer and apply as per package instructions.
#5	Old leaves curl under; new leaves are smaller than old leaves. Leaves may brown around margins.	Too much light	Move farther from window or light sources or filter light through a curtain.
#6	Plants are spindly, stems grow abnormally long, leaves lack color and are undersized, leaves may fall off.	Too little light	Move closer to windows or other light source.
#7	Yellow, brown, or white (bleached) spots on leaves (particularly on upper leaves).	Sun scorch caused by sudden increase in light intensity	Shade plants. Move from shade to sun gradually so plants can adapt. Some require shade always.
#8	Plants wilt even if soil is moist. Margins and tips of leaves burn. White crust may appear on leaf edge and on soil surface when dry.	Salt buildup in soil	Leach out excess salts by watering thoroughly and water a second time in 30 minutes to wash the salts out the drainage hole. Pour off drainage water.
#9	White crust on rim and sides of porous pots. Leaves touching rim wilt and die.	Salt accumulation on pot	Leach soil as above. Wash excess salts off pot with clear water. Wax rim of pot to prevent future salt deposits which might touch leaves.



Common Ailments of Houseplants courtesy of:
 University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners of Tulare-Kings Co.
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	What's Wrong	Probable Cause	What to Do
#10	Plants wilt between waterings, roots fill pot and may grow out drainage hole. Growth slow.	Too much plant for the pot	Repot in a larger container with a good potting soil mixture.
#11	Leaves turn yellow or curl downward or wilt.	Too much heat	Move to cooler spot. Avoid placing near heat registers or hot air outlets.
#12	Sudden wilting or shedding of foliage during cold weather.	Chilling	Move away from chilling drafts.
#13	White or yellow spots on leaves of African violets, gloxinias, and other hairy-leaved plants.	Cold water on leaves	Use room-temperature to lukewarm water for watering plants.
#14	Leaf edges are crinkly and brown. Tips of new leaves often dry up.	Lack of humidity	Increase humidity around plants by standing pots on a bed of moist gravel or place in planters with moist sphagnum moss packed around pots. Use a humidifier in home or move plants to a more humid area of the home (bathroom or over kitchen sink).
#15	Dark brown spots around leaf margins of tropical foliage plants (especially philodendron).	Raw natural gas or incompletely burned gas in home	Check gas lines and fittings for gas leaks. Adjust gas burners for blue flame. Have furnace checked for leaks or adjustment.
#16	Wilting and loss of foliage after repotting or initial potting.	Transplant shock	Give optimum care until plant adjusts to its new situation.
#17	Whitish, cottony, waxy insects on plants	Mealybugs	Isolate plant. Remove badly infested leaves. Kill with alcohol dipped swab. Spray with soapy water (about 3 drops liquid soap/quart water), then rinse. Check weekly.
#18	Foliage is flecked, yellow, bleached or bronzed. Profuse fine webbing often seen with heavy infestations. Very tiny pests that is sometimes invisible to the naked eye.	Mites	Isolate plant. Immerse plant and pot in 110° water for 15 minutes. Discard severely infected plants. Don't touch healthy plants after touching infected ones. Insecticides (labeled for house plants) and soapy water provide partial control.
#19	Small, waxy, soft orchard bodied stationary insects on leaves, stems or shoots. Can be red, white, brown, black or gray.	Scale	Isolate plant. Rub off scale with alcohol dipped swab. Spray with soapy water (about 3 drops liquid soap/quart water), then rinse. Check weekly.

Houseplants can recover and return to normal, healthy growth; however, recovery may require a few weeks to several months. If you cannot achieve the proper conditions for certain types of plants, it is best to discard them and get varieties which can grow successfully in the conditions available in your home.

Adapted from Washington State University Cooperative Extension Service. Yards and Gardens Bulletin #EM4022 by E. Blain Adams, 1976.