With all the cold weather we've had lately, it has been hard to go outside and enjoy the plants there. However, you can still take pleasure in them - just bring them inside. This is a perfect time of year to begin or add to your houseplant collection.

Houseplants come in all sizes, shapes and colors. They add a decorative touch to any home and create an atmosphere of warmth and life that cannot be equaled by any other furnishing.

Growing plants in the home can be challenging, because the environment often is not conducive to such efforts. Many homes have inadequate light, temperature fluctuations, and low humidity; nonetheless, there is a plant for almost any situation. Always match growing conditions to the needs of the plant.

The environment in our homes will dictate which plants will grow lavishly and which ones will suffer. The most important environmental factor for growing healthy indoor plants is light. Plants differ greatly in their light intensity requirements. Plants with highly colored leaves, such as coleus and crotons, plus flowering plants and succulents grow best when placed in an area where they receive full sunlight. Others, including ferns, philodendrons, and many other foliage plants, grow well with indirect light.

Temperature is another important factor in houseplant health. A daytime temperature of 65-75°F, and approximately 10°F lower at night, is satisfactory for most plants. A sudden temperature drop can injure plants, and temperatures below 50°F for extended periods may cause permanent damage. Avoid placing plants in hot or cold spots. Few plants do well on top of a television set, and almost none will survive the blast from a heating or air-conditioning vent.

One common cause of indoor plant death is too much watering. When the soil remains saturated, root systems are unable to function properly because of lack of oxygen in the soil. There is no set schedule about when to water house plants. The amount and frequency of watering depend on the type of potting mixture, the container, and the plants used.

The following methods may be used to determine when to water:

- **TOUCH** - The most accurate gauge to follow is to water when the potting mixture becomes dry to the touch. Stick your finger into the mix up to the first joint; if it is dry at your fingertip, you need to water.

- **TAPPING THE POT** - When the potting mix in a clay pot begins to dry, it shrinks away from the sides of the pot. Rap the side of the pot: if the sound is dull, the soil is moist; if hollow, water is needed.

- **ESTIMATING WEIGHT** - As potting mixtures become dry, a definite loss in weight can be observed.

- **JUDGING SOIL COLOR** - Potting mixtures will change from a dark to light color as they dry.

When needed, water thoroughly. Apply enough room temperature water until it runs out of the bottom of the pot. This type of watering washes out excess salts. It also guarantees that the bottom two-thirds of the pot is properly watered. Do not allow the pot to stand in water too long. Empty the drip saucer to prevent root diseases.

The growth rate of most plants indoors is much less than that of plants grown in a greenhouse or landscape. As a result, indoor plants do not need as much fertilizer. Interior plants under active growing conditions should be fertilized every two to three months. During winter months, or under conditions of low light, the frequency of fertilization should be reduced.

Check often for insects or diseases that may attack houseplants. Mites, aphids, scale, and fungus gnats are all
common insects of houseplants. However, by keeping healthy and in the proper location, infestations can be reduced.

This year at the Osceola County Fair, a new plant category has been added to the community exhibits. This is a great opportunity to show off your prized plant or produce that you have worked so hard growing.

Categories for the Community Horticulture exhibit include produce: vegetables and fruits, bonsai, hanging baskets, creative container gardens, potted flowering plants and house plants.

For more information on the fair's horticulture contest or for more information on growing houseplants, please call the Osceola County Master Gardeners at 321-697-3000.

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