

Common House Plant Disorders

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WHAT THEY ARE:

Careful management of the plant's environment can minimize many house plant problems that may arise in the home or office. It is helpful to understand some of the conditions that may lead to disease problems in order to better manage houseplant health.

One of the most common problems of house plants is root rot. The most common cause of root rot of our house plants is over watering. Several fungal microorganisms, such as *Pythium* and *Phytophthora*, cause infectious root disease of house plants. Most of these organisms are associated with wet or poorly drained potting media. We have a tendency to water indoor plants as we water outside plants. This is too often and too much. This condition leads to an oxygen depletion of the roots that puts a severe stress on the entire plant. The frequency by which we water our plants depends largely on the type of plant, soil type, and growing conditions in the plant's environment.

Pot-bound roots may also cause various problems. This condition results from the plant's being grown in the same pot for a long time. Roots literally fill up the pot, creating an unfavorable environment for normal root growth. Roots may soon lose their ability to support healthy plant growth.

Salt accumulation may occur from a buildup of fertilizer in the growing container or from hard water in the community. This is often seen as a white or yellowish crust near the drain holes or at the base of the pot. Brown leaf tips and margins are the common result of salt damage.

General changes in the plant's environment may result in leaf drop. Weeping fig (*Ficus benjamini*) is especially prone to dropping its leaves when moved from different light intensities or air temperatures.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

Symptoms often associated with root rot include wilt and leaf yellowing. Plants may go into a permanent wilt in which the plant eventually dies. With root-bound plants, roots tend to wind around each other and fill the container. In severe cases, roots may grow over the top of the pot. The accumulation of salts in the potting media may, chalky residue around drain holes of the container is an indication of a salt buildup.

PREVENTION TIPS:

Always water house plants thoroughly until water flows out the drain holes at the bottom of the container. Do not water again until the soil in the root zone is barely moist to the touch. Potting soil should drain well. To minimize salt accumulation, periodically flood the potting media to leach or wash through excess salts from the soil. A good, well-drained soil reduces the likelihood of salt buildup.

Periodically examine the root ball. Repotting may be necessary. The new pot should be 1–2 inches larger in diameter and depth than the old pot. Selective root pruning may be helpful for severe cases.

It is always a good idea to do a little research on your house plant beforehand. Having a good knowledge of a suitable environment for the plant can prevent many problems. Knowing something about your plant's light, water, and temperature requirements may save you much grief later, especially if it is an expensive addition to the home. Houseplants are grown in a much different environment than our landscape or garden plants. These "special" growing conditions can create a unique set of problems that prevent us from having a lush and pleasing interiorscape that we can enjoy in the comfort of our homes or business.

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