VIRIDOTHEK

Green Housemates

Houseplants for your rooms – from beginner to expert

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ALL PLANTS

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Basics

Every portrait starts with a fact sheet: a few symbols, a few numbers – and you already know whether a plant suits you and your home. Here's what's behind them and what you can actually do.

Most entries in the fact sheet are scales from 1 to 5: the more symbols are filled in, the more of it the plant needs. For light, the strong symbol shows the ideal spot and the pale ones next to it what the plant can still put up with. All entries are rules of thumb – your plant itself is the best guide to whether it's doing well. What it's trying to tell you with yellow, brown or droopy leaves is in every portrait under "Symptoms & help".

Care

very easy	Forgives mistakes and forgotten watering – perfect for getting started.
easy	Does fine with normal care, as long as the spot is right.
moderate	Quickly shows watering and placement mistakes – a little attention pays off.
demanding	Needs just the right conditions, such as lots of light or high humidity.
for experts	Usually only thrives long-term with experience or equipment like a grow light or a glass cabinet.

The care level also sets the order in this booklet: it starts with the indestructible ones and ends with the divas. If you're just getting started, pick your first housemates from the front.

Light

shade	A few steps from a window without direct sun, 1–3 m from a window with morning or evening sun, or 4–6 m from a window with midday sun.
partial shade	Right at a window without direct sun, just under 1 m beside a window with morning or evening sun, or 1–3 m from a window with midday sun.
bright, no midday sun	A bright spot without direct sun – say behind a sheer curtain at a window with morning or evening sun, or 1–2 m from a window with midday sun.
bright with some sun	Right at a window with morning or evening sun, or up to 1.5 m from a window with midday sun.
full sun	Right at a window with midday sun, as much sun as possible.

Light can be one of the most limiting factors for houseplants. Outdoors it is many times brighter than indoors[1]. And with every step away from the window it quickly gets darker: just a few steps away, only a tenth of the light may arrive[2]. Curtains, blinds, balconies and canopies swallow even more light[2].

The distances in the table are rules of thumb from an overview by the University of Illinois, converted from feet to metres and rounded[1]. The overview names windows by compass direction, the table by their sun: a window with midday sun faces south in the northern hemisphere and north in the southern hemisphere and gets the most sun; one facing the other way gets hardly any direct sun. In winter every plant can stand as bright as possible. In summer, though, sensitive plants can get sunburn behind glass[3] – then move them back a little.

Water

very little	Only water once the soil has dried out completely – roughly every 2–4 weeks in summer, less often in winter.
little	Water when the soil is dry a finger deep – roughly every 1–2 weeks in summer.
moderate	Water when the top 2–3 cm are dry – roughly once a week in summer.
plenty	Water as soon as the surface starts to dry – often several times a week in summer.
always moist	The soil must never dry out, but mustn't stand in water either – check often.

The times in the table are rough guidelines for a bright, normally heated room. But never water by the calendar – check first whether the plant really needs water[3]. The easiest way is the finger test: push your finger into the soil up to the second knuckle. If soil sticks to your finger, there's still enough water[2]. With a bit of practice you can also tell by the weight: dry pots are lighter[3].

How to water properly. Water thoroughly until water runs out at the bottom, then tip away the water from the saucer or cachepot[3]. A pot without a drainage hole almost inevitably leads to waterlogging – and then the roots rot. Use room-temperature water, especially in winter[3].

In winter most plants need less water, because they hardly grow in low light. In a cool room many manage one to two

weeks without watering. If the plant stands somewhere warm above the radiator, though, the soil still dries out quickly[3].

Humidity

dry air is fine
Copes well even with dry, heated air in winter.

low
Normal room air is enough – just don't put it right above a radiator.

medium
In winter, grateful for neighbouring plants or a tray of damp gravel.

high
Needs help – a gravel tray, a group of plants, a steamy bathroom or a humidifier.

very high
Only thrives long-term in a glass cabinet, a terrarium or with a humidifier.

Heated rooms are often surprisingly dry: 10 to 30 percent relative humidity is not unusual, while many tropical plants are used to 70 to 90 percent in their homeland[2]. A small hygrometer shows you what it's like at your place.

This is how you help plants that love humidity[3,2]:

- **Gravel tray:** stand the pot on a tray of gravel or expanded clay, and only add enough water that the bottom of the pot doesn't sit in it.
- **Grouping:** several plants side by side raise the humidity between them.
- **Humidifier:** the most effective solution for very demanding plants.
- **Bathroom:** many tropical plants are best off in a steamy bathroom.

Misting can help if you do it often, but it can encourage leaf diseases in some plants[3,2].

Height

small (up to 30 cm)
Fits on any windowsill or shelf.

medium-low (30–60 cm)
For a windowsill, shelf or sideboard.

medium (60 cm–1 m)
Best on the floor or on a stool.

tall (1–2 m)
A floor plant – needs room upwards and to the sides.

very tall (over 2 m)
Grows up to the ceiling over time unless you cut it back.

The height in the fact sheet is the size a plant typically reaches indoors after a few years. For hanging plants it shows the shoot length instead, that is, how long the trailing stems get. Next to the symbols is the approximate value the level comes from. After that come the width – how much room the plant needs to the sides – and the growth habit: upright, bushy, as a rosette, climbing or trailing. If "est." comes before the width, no source gives a value for the houseplant; we derived it from the size outdoors or from the leaf size.

Growth

very slow
Barely changes over the years – rarely needs repotting, almost never pruning.

slow
Grows at a leisurely pace, new leaves tend to come one at a time.

medium
Grows visibly during the season without getting out of hand.

fast
Puts on a lot during the growing season – repot more often, prune now and then.

very fast
Grows at a racing pace in good light – pruning and a support are part of the care.

Growth shows how fast a plant puts on size in good conditions – and so also how often you'll need to repot or prune. The levels are rough classifications, not measurements.

Temperature

“ideal” is the comfort range; below the minimum temperature the plant can be damaged – watch out at cold windows and in cold draughts in winter.

Most houseplants are happy at a perfectly normal room temperature[2]. Take care in winter: when it's freezing outside, leaves shouldn't touch the windowpane[2]. Keep plants out of cold draughts, and don't leave them behind a drawn curtain at night – it can get very cold there[3].

Soil

houseplant soil (peat-free)
Loose, lightly pre-fertilised all-round soil for most foliage plants. Ideally peat-free.

cactus and succulent soil
Very free-draining, with lots of sand, grit, pumice or lava rock. Holds little water and dries quickly – for cacti and succulents. To mix your own: houseplant soil with a third sand or grit.

standard potting compost
A gardener's standard compost with some clay. Heavier and more stable than ordinary houseplant soil, holds water and nutrients well – for large, top-heavy plants.

mineral substrate (e.g. expanded clay, pumice)
No humus at all, e.g. expanded clay, pumice or lava rock. Doesn't rot and hardly compacts; nutrients come only from the fertiliser.

orchid substrate
Coarse pieces of bark, very airy. For plants that grow on trees in the wild.

Soil is more than dirt in a pot: it holds water and nutrients and still has to let enough air reach the roots. Ready-made soils are made of organic parts such as compost, bark or wood fibre and mineral ones such as sand, perlite or clay[2]. Sand and perlite improve drainage[2]. Plants that need extra drainage benefit from grit or sharp sand (horticultural, not builders' sand) mixed into the soil[3]. Ideally buy peat-free soil, as the RHS advises[4].

Feeding

How often to feed during the growing season – liquid fertiliser in the watering can, never onto dry soil.



houseplant soil (peat-free) Photo: Author unknown, Public domain



cactus and succulent soil Photo: Testmaskara, CC BY-SA 4.0



mineral substrate (e.g. expanded clay, pumice) Photo: Lucis, CC BY-SA 3.0



orchid substrate Photo: Fizzie41, CC BY-SA 4.0

During the growing season, roughly from spring to autumn, plants use up nutrients, which you top up with fertiliser. The easiest is liquid fertiliser that you add to the watering can. Foliage plants do well with a fertiliser high in nitrogen; flowering plants need more phosphorus and potassium. In winter there isn't enough light to use fertiliser – then feed at most once a month or not at all[3].

Never feed onto dry soil, it can burn the roots[3]. And better too little than too much: white crusts on the soil, brown leaf tips or wilting leaves despite moist soil point to too much fertiliser. Then flush the soil thoroughly several times and don't feed for a while[2].

Repotting

A rough rhythm – the roots and the pot show whether it's really time.

The number of years in the fact sheet is only a rough rhythm. You can tell whether it's really time by these signs[3,2]:

- When you lift it out, you see a crowded mass of roots.
- The soil dries out very quickly after watering, and the plant hardly grows.
- Algae grow on the soil – a sign that it may have gone sour.

It's best to repot in spring, when the plant roots in quickly during the growing season. The new pot should only be a few centimetres wider (see "Pot" below), otherwise a lot of soil stays wet for a long time[3,2]. Afterwards, don't feed for a few weeks – fresh soil is usually pre-fertilised[2].

Pot

Pot diameter for a young plant or cutting → for the full-grown plant. “est.” means the value is derived with a rule of thumb.

The fact sheet gives two diameters: the pot for a young plant or a cutting, and the one for the full-grown plant, followed by the shape and material where they matter. If "est." comes before them, no source gives a value. We then derived it with two rules of thumb and rounded it to common pot sizes: rooted cuttings go into pots of 8–10 cm[5], and the pot measures about a third of the plant's height[2]. For large plants we cap it at 30 cm: the RHS repots palms until they are in 20–30 cm pots, after which only the top layer of soil is renewed[6] – as with figs that are too big to repot[7].

- **Drainage hole:** you can't do without one[3]. A layer of gravel in the pot doesn't replace it[8].
- **Cachepot and saucer:** put the plant in its pot with a hole inside the nice cachepot[2], and tip away any water still standing in it after a few hours[8].
- **Clay or plastic:** clay is porous, the soil dries faster and you water more often. Plastic and glazed ceramic keep the moisture longer[2].
- **Shape:** succulents like small or shallow pots, because a little soil dries quickly[8]. The amaryllis wants a pot twice as tall as the bulb[9].
- **Clear:** for orchids it shows whether the substrate is still moist[10].

As a rule of thumb when repotting: only 2–5 cm more in diameter[2]. The RHS says 5–10 cm, or as much room as the plant needs for two to three years[3].

Toxicity

non-toxic
Listed as non-toxic by the sources – it still doesn't make a good snack.

⚠ **mildly toxic**
Chewing or swallowing can irritate the mouth, stomach and gut. Touching is harmless, eating isn't.

⚠ **toxic**
Even small amounts can cause clear symptoms. Keep it out of reach of children and pets.

⚠ **highly toxic**
Serious poisoning is possible. Not for homes with small children or pets that nibble.

Sap irritates the skin
The sap can irritate the skin – wear gloves when cutting and dividing.

Many popular houseplants are toxic. That sounds dramatic, but it's usually harmless: the vast majority of plant poisoning cases cause mild symptoms or none at all, and only about two to three percent are moderate or severe[11]. Children are affected most often: they eat fruit or put leaves and other plant parts in their mouths[11]. Every fact sheet gives the toxicity for humans, cats and dogs separately. Our levels "toxic" and "highly toxic" roughly match the moderate and severe poisoning risk as classified by the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR)[11].

Toxic is not the same as dangerous to touch. With some plants, though, the sap irritates the skin. Then the fact sheet also says "Sap irritates the skin", and you're best off wearing gloves when cutting and repotting.

⚠ If something has happened

Remove plant remains from the mouth right away. As a first step you can give one or two glasses of water or tea to drink. No milk, no salt water, and don't induce vomiting. Call your local poison control centre or see a doctor, and take the plant or a piece of it with you[11]. In case of unconsciousness or severe breathing difficulties, call your local emergency number[12]. For cats and dogs, call the vet straight away – and take the plant (or a photo of it) with you to the appointment too[13].

MY POISON CONTROL CENTRE

_____

MY VET

_____



Photo: Frank C. Müller, CC BY-SA 4.0

Cast-iron plant

The Shade Survivor *Aspidistra elatior* · also Aspidistra, Bar room plant

Glossy, leathery leaves rising straight from the soil, and a toughness that earned it its name: it copes with low light, draughts and erratic watering. Its flowers hide at soil level.

What it does for you

Aspidistras are among the easiest houseplants to grow: they cope with low light, erratic watering and changing temperatures, hence the name cast-iron plant[1]. That makes it a plant for a dark corner or a draughty hallway, and it can live for many years[1]. Its glossy, dark green, leathery leaves grow up to 60 cm long[2,1].

MYTH

"An aspidistra improves the air in your home."

FACT

Even the RHS growing guide says it can[1]. But in real homes, normal ventilation exchanges the air much faster than potted plants could filter out pollutants. For a noticeable effect you'd need, depending on the study, ten to a thousand plants per square metre[3].

FACT SHEET

CARE	very easy
LIGHT	partial shade
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	low
HEIGHT	up to approx. 60 cm tall, 60 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	slow
TEMPERATURE	ideal 10–20 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: non-toxic Cats: non-toxic Dogs: non-toxic
SOIL	standard potting compost houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, early spring to late summer
REPOTTING	every 3–4 years
POT	est. 9 → 19 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild it grows in southern Japan, mainly in the subtropics[4]; MBG also names China[5], a Zurich database Taiwan and the southern Japanese islands[6]. It is the cast-iron or bar room plant of the Victorian era, and many dark Victorian homes were decorated with it[7]. Bar room plant refers to its ability to withstand spittoonish conditions[8].



ORIGIN

Japan

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

The genus name comes from the Greek *aspidion*, a shield[5].

Caution

The ASPCA lists it as non-toxic for cats and dogs[9]; a University of Zurich veterinary database rates it as presumably non-toxic, having found no evidence of toxicity in the literature[6]. The Minnesota Poison Control System lists it as non-toxic for people, but notes that any plant may cause unexpected reactions in some people, including choking[10].

Care

The RHS guide covers aspidistras in general; this species is the most widely sold.

Light. Ideally low or filtered light, well away from direct sun, which can scorch the leaves. In very poor light it grows more slowly, and variegated leaves may turn plain green[1]. MBG: best in bright indirect light; direct sun bleaches the leaves[5].

Water. Water regularly from spring to autumn: moist, never waterlogged, as soggy compost can rot the roots. In winter a little less, but don't let it dry out completely[1]. As a rule of thumb, about once a week in summer.

Temperature & humidity. Happiest at 5–20 °C, in a fairly cool room away from heat sources; it copes with draughts and changing temperatures and is fine in the fairly dry air of normal homes[1]. MBG gives a winter minimum of 10 °C[5].

Soil, pot & repotting. It grows slowly and can stay in its pot for several years, until roots appear through the drainage holes. Then repot in spring into a pot only slightly larger, in equal parts peat-free loam-based and peat-free multi-purpose compost[1].

Feeding. A general-purpose houseplant feed monthly from spring to late summer[1].

Propagating

Divide a large clump in spring: cut through the thick rhizomes so that each piece has several leaves[1]. Be patient – young plants may produce only two leaves a year[11].

Extras

The inconspicuous flowers may appear at soil level, but usually not on houseplants[5]. Florists value the leaves[11]: in arrangements they last a month or longer[7]. 'Variegata' has leaves striped in creamy white[1].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaves lean to the side and turn slightly pale green. → Water regularly from spring to autumn; in winter a little less, but never let it dry out completely.	The roots rot. → Water less – keep the compost moist, but never waterlogged.
Light	It grows more slowly; variegated leaves can turn plain green. → Move it to filtered light, still out of direct sun.	Leaves scorch, bleach or turn brown. → Move it well away from direct sun.

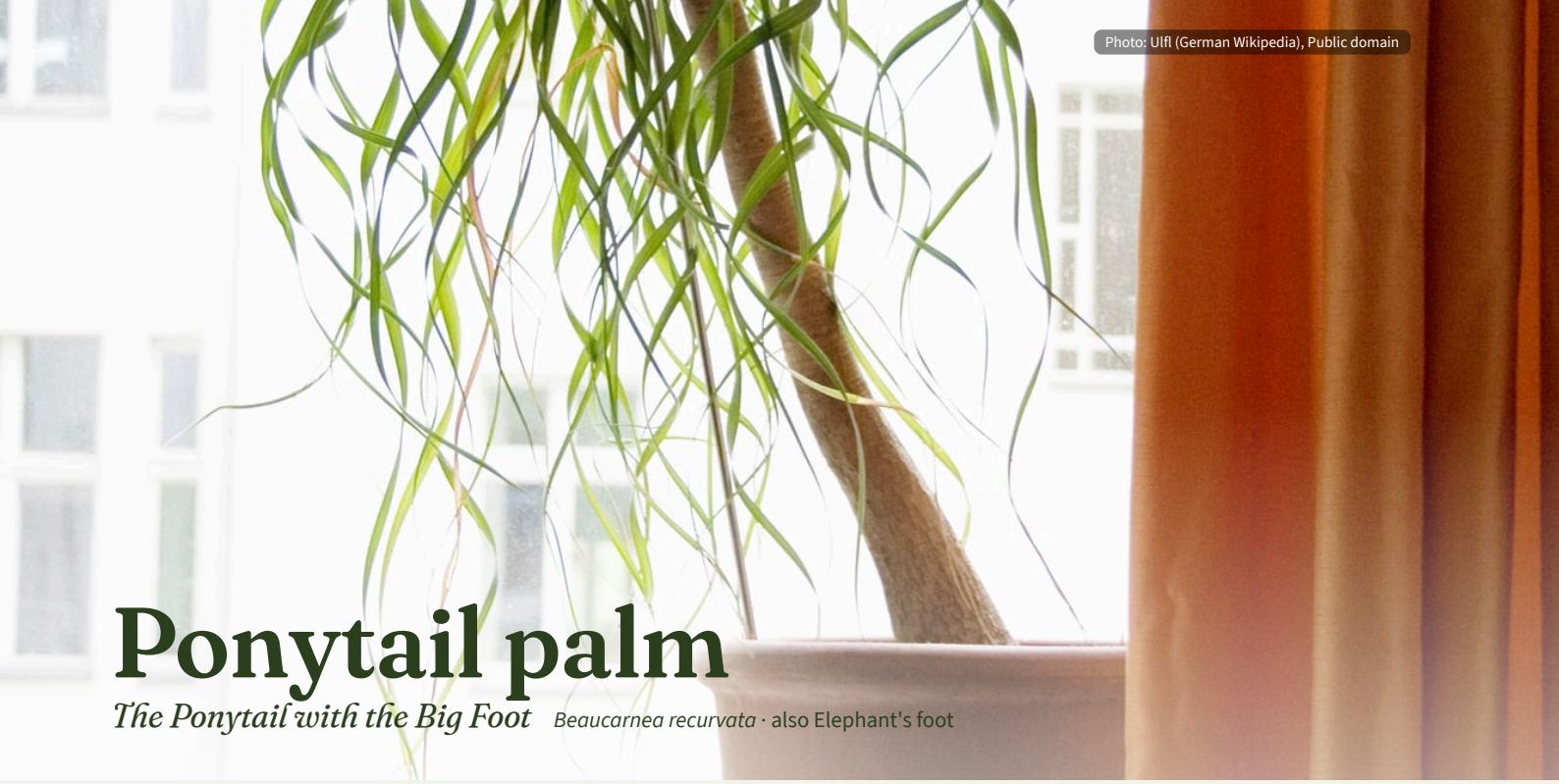


Photo: Ulfl (German Wikipedia), Public domain

Ponytail palm

The Ponytail with the Big Foot *Beaucarnea recurvata* · also Elephant's foot

Thick as an elephant's leg at the bottom, a green tuft on top: the ponytail palm stores water in its trunk, loves sun and forgives almost everything – except wet feet.

What it does for you

The ponytail palm is easy to care for and does well even for beginners[1,2]. In its thick stem base, the caudex, it stores water and so survives long dry spells[2]. Above it, the narrow leaves cascade down like a fountain[1]. Dry, heated air doesn't bother it[3], and it lives so long that it can easily outlive you[2].

MYTH

"The ponytail palm is a palm."

FACT

It isn't closely related to palms – it belongs to the asparagus family[4,3]. People only take it for a palm because of its single trunk with a tuft of leaves on top[2]. In fact it's a succulent from semi-deserts[2] and needs correspondingly little water[1].

FACT SHEET

CARE	very easy
LIGHT	full sun
WATER	little
HUMIDITY	dry air is fine
HEIGHT	up to approx. 1.5 m tall, 90 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	very slow
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–24 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: non-toxic Cats: non-toxic Dogs: non-toxic
SOIL	cactus and succulent soil
FEEDING	every 12 weeks, spring to late summer
REPOTTING	every 3–5 years
POT	est. 9 → 24 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild it grows only in Mexico, in the Gulf, north-east and south-west regions[4]. There it grows on stony, poor soils in low, deciduous forests and reaches up to 9 m[3].



ORIGIN

Mexico

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

An older name is *Nolina recurvata*[5]. Since 2017 it has been under international species protection (CITES, Appendix II)[6].

Caution

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln lists the ponytail palm as non-toxic for people[7]; for cats and dogs it is considered non-toxic as well[8,3]. Careful when handling it, though: the leaf edges are finely serrated and can cut the skin[2].

Care

Light. As bright as possible, ideally with direct sun[2,3]. A window with only morning or evening sun works too[1]. It can go outside in summer once nights stay above 10 °C, but get it used to the sun slowly, or it burns[2,3].

Water. Water thoroughly and let the soil dry out in between, much less in winter[2,3]. Too much water is the most common reason it dies[2].

Temperature & humidity. It likes dry winters and copes well with heated indoor air[3,2]; normal room temperature suits it[9]. It shouldn't get below 10 °C[3,5].

Soil, pot & repotting. Cactus soil or potting compost with sharp sand or fine gravel[2]. A fairly small pot with good drainage is enough, and it also stays smaller in it[2]. You only need to repot it after many years[2], then in spring[5] – roughly every three to five years is a rule of thumb.

Feeding. Feeding once or twice per growing season is enough[2]; Iowa State suggests a dilute feed once or twice a month in spring and summer[1].

Propagating

It can be propagated almost only from seed, which is hard to get. Sown in spring at 20 °C or more, the seeds germinate without pre-treatment[2]. Whether small side shoots on the trunk form roots is disputed: the RHS names them as an option[5], Wisconsin says they don't root[2].

Extras

Usually only large, old plants flower, and hardly ever indoors[2,3]. It is dioecious: only female plants bear seeds[2]. If you cut the top off young plants, they sprout several heads – that's how nurseries grow multi-headed specimens[2].

Brown leaf tips are common indoors, caused by too much or too little water, too much fertiliser or built-up salts; you can cut them off[2]. Pests are rare, mostly mealybugs and scale insects[2].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaf tips turn brown and dry. → Water thoroughly as soon as the soil has dried out.	Trunk and roots rot. → Let the soil dry out well, don't leave water in the cachepot. Water much less in winter.
Light	It grows weakly and the foliage turns yellowish-green. → Move it to the brightest window, ideally with direct sun.	Brown, burnt patches on the leaves. → After winter or before moving it outside, get it used to harsh sun slowly.
Fertiliser		Brown leaf tips. → Feed less often – once or twice a season is enough.
Warmth	Leaves droop, curl up and wilt. → Don't keep it below 10 °C, and only put it outside once nights stay above 10 °C.	



Spider plant

The Big Family *Chlorophytum comosum* · also Airplane plant

Long, striped leaves that arch over like a fountain, and lots of plantlets on long stalks. Robust, non-toxic and quick to propagate – the plant for passing on.

What it does for you

The spider plant is considered one of the easiest houseplants of all[1]. It stores water in its thick, fleshy roots and so survives the odd forgotten watering[2]. And it's non-toxic – for cats and dogs[3] as well as for people[4]. On top of that, it grows little plantlets on long stalks that people love to give away. That's how it became one of the most widespread houseplants in the world[5].

MYTH

"The spider plant is a particularly good air purifier."

FACT

It owes this reputation to the NASA study from 1989, which also tested the spider plant – but in small, airtight chambers[6]. In real homes, normal ventilation alone exchanges the air much faster than potted plants could filter out pollutants. For a noticeable effect you'd need, depending on the study, ten to a thousand plants per square metre[7]. So: enjoy it – and still open the window.

FACT SHEET

CARE	very easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	low
HEIGHT	up to approx. 45 cm tall, 60 cm wide · rosette
GROWTH	fast
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–24 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: non-toxic Cats: non-toxic Dogs: non-toxic
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 8 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 1–2 years
POT	est. 9 → 14 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild, the spider plant grows in tropical West Africa to Cameroon and from Ethiopia to South Africa[8]. In South Africa you'll find it in the undergrowth of wooded river valleys, in scrub and on cliffs, from the coast to over 1000 metres[5].



ORIGIN

Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Eswatini, South Africa

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

Carl Peter Thunberg, the "father of South African botany", described it in 1794. Its species name *comosum* goes back to the Greek *kome*, a tuft of hair, and refers to the leaf rosette. The Nguni in South Africa traditionally use it as a medicinal plant and to protect mother and child[5].

Caution

Good news: the spider plant is non-toxic for cats and dogs[3], and the Bonn poison information centre rates it as non-toxic for people too. Still, it isn't meant to be eaten: larger amounts can cause stomach upset and nausea[4].

Care

Light. Bright, but without direct sun – harsh summer sun scorches the leaves. It copes with less light, but then grows more slowly and the stripes fade[1].

Water. Keep the soil slightly moist[1] and let the surface dry a little between waterings[9] – as a rule of thumb about once a week in summer, less often in winter. Tip away water in the cachepot. Fluoride in tap water can brown the tips, rainwater is ideal[1].

Temperature & humidity. 18–24 °C during the day, a little cooler at night is welcome[9], ideally not below 10 °C[10]. Normal room air is fine – just don't put it right next to the radiator[1].

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free houseplant soil[1] and a pot with a drainage hole. A hanging basket shows off the arching stalks nicely[11]. Repot every one to two years into a slightly bigger pot[1]. It forms the most plantlets when it's a little cramped in the pot[2]; a pot that's too big holds back flowering[1].

Feeding. From spring to early autumn liquid fertiliser about every two months[1]; too much fertiliser holds back the plantlets[11].

Propagating

Easiest via the plantlets on the long stalks: set them on a pot of moist potting mix while they're still attached to the mother plant, and cut the stalk once they have roots[2]. Or put them in a glass of water until the roots are longer[1]. Large plants can also be divided[1].

Extras

The small white star-shaped flowers sit on the same stalks as the plantlets. The stalks are triggered by short days: if the spider plant gets less than twelve hours of light a day for at least three weeks, it forms them[11]. Well-known varieties are 'Vittatum' with a white central stripe and 'Variegatum' with white edges[2].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaves turn pale and dull, the tips brown. → Water thoroughly and more regularly from now on. You can cut off brown tips.	The soil stays wet all the time, the plant weakens, roots rot. → Take it out of the pot, remove rotten roots, replant in fresh, free-draining soil and water more sparingly.
Light	Slow growth, yellowish leaves, the stripes fade, hardly any plantlets. → Move it somewhere brighter, but not into harsh sun.	Yellow to brown, scorched patches – especially in summer. → Move it out of direct sun and cut off scorched leaves.
Fertiliser	Hardly grows any more, even though the spot is bright. → Repot into fresh soil or feed every two months from spring to early autumn.	Brown leaf tips, hardly any plantlets. → Flush the soil thoroughly and don't feed for a few months.
Warmth	Forms no flowers or plantlets. → Move it somewhere warmer and in winter keep it a little away from cold windows and draughts.	



Photo: Arch. Attilio Mileto, CC BY-SA 3.0

Jade plant

The Little Windowsill Tree *Crassula ovata* · also Jade tree, Crassula

Thick leaves, a gnarled trunk and plenty of patience with forgetful waterers: the jade plant wants sun, thorough watering in summer and a cool, dry break in winter.

What it does for you

Over the years the jade plant grows into a small tree with a thick, woody trunk[1,2]. As a succulent it stores water in its leaves, stem and roots and forgives neglect – it even likes warm, dry heated air[2]. In a sunny spot the leaves get red edges[2].

MYTH

"As a succulent, the jade plant needs almost no water."

FACT

Thanks to its water stores it does cope well with dry spells[2]. In spring and summer, though, it wants thorough watering as soon as the soil has dried[2,3]. It only stays almost dry in winter[4]. Too much water harms it just as much: then it drops leaves and the stem rots[2]. Overwatering is the biggest killer of succulents kept as houseplants[3].

FACT SHEET

CARE	very easy
LIGHT	full sun
WATER	little
HUMIDITY	dry air is fine
HEIGHT	up to approx. 1 m tall, 60 cm wide · bushy
GROWTH	slow
TEMPERATURE	ideal 16–21 °C · not below 5 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: mildly toxic Cats: toxic Dogs: toxic
SOIL	cactus and succulent soil
FEEDING	every 8 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 → 30 cm · clay

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild it grows in south-eastern South Africa as far as south-eastern Mozambique[5,3], mainly in the bushland of the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal on dry, rocky slopes[2]. *Crassula* means "thick", *ovata* "egg-shaped" – after the fleshy, oval leaves[2].



ORIGIN

South Africa, Mozambique

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

Older names are *Crassula argentea* and *C. portulacea*[6]. It has since gone wild in the Canary Islands, Madeira and California[5].

Caution

For people the jade plant is considered non-toxic to mildly toxic. Recent literature describes no poisonings, only isolated cases of stomach ache and vomiting[7]. After nibbling on it, cats and dogs may vomit and become lethargic and unsteady on their feet; which substance causes this is unknown[8].

Care

Light. Best with four or more hours of direct sun[2], e.g. at a south- or west-facing window (southern hemisphere: north or west)[6]. Get it used to harsh sun gradually[3]. Bright without sun works too, but then the leaves stay green[2].

Water. From mid-spring to mid-autumn water thoroughly when the top 2–3 cm are dry, and let the water drain away[3]. From late autumn until early spring it goes into its winter rest: cool and almost dry[4]. In the weeks in between, water less and less in autumn and gradually more again in spring.

Temperature & humidity. Around 16–21 °C by day, it can be cooler at night[3], in winter 8–10 °C at night[4]. Hard frost kills it[2]. It doesn't care about humidity[2].

Soil, pot & repotting. Cactus or succulent soil, or potting compost with perlite or sand[2]. Heavy clay or ceramic pots work well[3], but not too big, or the soil stays wet for too long[4]. Repot every two to three years in spring[3,4].

Feeding. From spring to early autumn feed every two months[3,2].

Propagating

It is one of the easiest plants to propagate: take a leaf or a piece of shoot, let it dry for a few days and push it into dry, free-draining soil[2]. Keep it only slightly moist until it roots[4]. It works fastest in summer[2].

Extras

Older plants carry white to pink star-shaped flowers[3]. As a short-day plant it needs long nights for this: in autumn water less, keep it around 13 °C at night and don't switch on a lamp in the evening[2].

Its family, the stonecrops (Crassulaceae), gave CAM photosynthesis its name – it was first described in them[9]. The most common pest is mealybugs[2].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	The leaves shrivel, growth is slow. → In summer water thoroughly as soon as the soil has dried out on top.	Leaves drop, the stem goes soft and rots, leaves get corky blisters. → Let the soil dry out, don't leave water standing in the cachepot. In winter keep it almost dry.
Light	Deep green leaves, long, drooping shoots, hardly any red leaf edges. → Move it to the brightest window with direct sun.	Brown, scorched patches; damaged leaves die and drop. → After winter or a move, get it used to harsh sun gradually.
Warmth	Frozen leaves die and drop. → Keep it frost-free and not below 5 °C.	



Photo: Slyronit, CC BY-SA 4.0

Pothos

The Climber *Epipremnum aureum* · also Devil's ivy, Golden pothos

Heart-shaped, yellow-marbled leaves on trailing stems a metre or more long – hanging from a basket or climbing a moss pole. It forgives a lot and you can propagate it in a glass of water.

What it does for you

Pothos is considered easy to care for and adaptable[1] – and it is one of the most popular houseplants in the world[2]. Its stems grow two metres and longer[3]. You can let it hang from a basket or climb a moss pole[1]. New plants are easy to raise in a glass of water[1].

MYTH

"Pothos filters pollutants out of the air in your home."

FACT

It was part of the famous NASA study from 1989 – but the tests were done in small, airtight chambers[4]. In real homes, normal ventilation alone exchanges the air much faster than potted plants could filter out pollutants. For a noticeable effect you'd need, depending on the study, ten to a thousand plants per square metre[5].

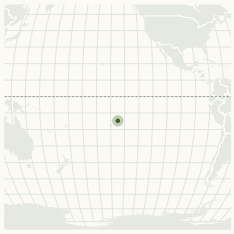
FACT SHEET

CARE	very easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	little
HUMIDITY	low
SHOOT LENGTH	up to approx. 2.4 m long, est. 50 cm wide · trailing
GROWTH	fast
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–30 °C · not below 16 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: toxic Cats: toxic Dogs: toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to mid-autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 → 17 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild, pothos only grows on Mo'orea, one of the Society Islands in French Polynesia[6].



ORIGIN

French Polynesia

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

Its former botanical names were *Scindapsus aureus* and *Pothos aureus*[6] – hence the name "pothos". By the way, the plant in your pot is a juvenile form: once it climbs upwards, its leaves grow many times larger[2]. You practically never see it flower – neither in the wild nor in cultivation. The last report of a flower dates from 1962. The reason is a lack of the plant hormone gibberellin – given gibberellin, it flowers[2].

Caution

Pothos contains calcium oxalate crystals. Chewing on it irritates the mouth and throat and can cause vomiting and trouble swallowing[7]. In cats and dogs the mouth, tongue and lips burn intensely, they drool and vomit[8]. So: keep it out of reach of children and pets. It can irritate the skin – wear gloves when cutting[1].

Care

Light. Bright without direct sun, e.g. at a window with morning or evening sun. Harsh summer sun scorches the leaves; with too little light it grows weakly and loses its pattern[1].

Water. Only water once the soil is almost dry (finger test), and never leave it standing in water – otherwise the roots rot[1]. As a rule of thumb, that means about every one to two weeks in summer, less often in winter.

Temperature & humidity. 18–30 °C is ideal, no cold draughts[1]. Not below 16 °C at night[7]. It doesn't need high humidity[1].

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free houseplant soil, a pot with a drainage hole. On a moss pole the stems hold on with aerial roots if you keep the pole moist[1]. Repot in spring when roots grow out of the pot – every two to three years, only one size bigger[1].

Feeding. From spring to mid-autumn once a month with a general houseplant fertiliser[1], not outside that season.

Propagating

Cut off a piece of stem just below a leaf node and put it in a glass of water in a bright spot. Once it has roots, it goes into soil[1]. Important: every cutting needs at least one node[7].

Extras

If it gets too long and bare, cut the stems back above a leaf – then it branches out and gets bushier[1]. The cut pieces are your next cuttings.

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaves hang limp, the soil is dry all the way down. → Water thoroughly, pour off the excess after 15 minutes.	Yellow leaves, the soil stays wet, roots rot. → Let the soil dry out well, remove rotten roots, replant in fresh, free-draining soil.
Light	Weak growth, the marbling fades. → Move it somewhere brighter, cut back long stems.	Light brown, scorched patches on the leaves, especially in summer. → Move it out of direct sun. Scorched leaves stay patchy.
Fertiliser	Leaves turn yellow, new leaves stay small. → Feed once a month from spring to mid-autumn.	
Warmth	Hardly grows any more, leaves suffer after cold draughts at the window or from vents. → Move it somewhere warmer, in winter away from cold windows, air conditioning and heating vents.	



Photo: Enzo Rippa, CC BY-SA 4.0

Snake plant

The Unkillable *Dracaena trifasciata* · also Mother-in-law's tongue, Sansevieria

Stiff as a ruler, banded green like a snake's skin and so undemanding that it easily survives weeks of holiday. If you're just getting started with houseplants, you're in the right place.

What it does for you

The snake plant is a succulent: it stores water in its thick leaves and uses CAM photosynthesis – it opens its stomata mainly at night and so loses hardly any water during the day[1]. For you, that means: it forgives forgotten watering like hardly any other plant. For the same reason, though, it adds hardly anything to the humidity[2].

What it really can do: make your home greener and cosier. Just handling houseplants – repotting, say – lowered stress markers such as diastolic blood pressure and sympathetic nerve activity in one small study[3].

MYTH

"The snake plant cleans the air, so it belongs in the bedroom."

FACT

The famous NASA study from 1989 tested plants in small, airtight chambers[4]. In real homes, normal ventilation alone exchanges the air many times faster than potted plants could filter out pollutants. For a noticeable effect you'd need, depending on the study, ten to a thousand plants per square metre[5]. The "oxygen at night" is a myth too: at night it takes in CO_2 and stores it, oxygen is only released in the light[1]. You can still put it in the bedroom – simply because it's beautiful.

FACT SHEET

CARE	very easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	very little
HUMIDITY	dry air is fine
HEIGHT	up to approx. 1 m tall, 50 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	slow
TEMPERATURE	ideal 15–24 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: toxic Cats: toxic Dogs: toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	cactus and succulent soil
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–4 years
POT	est. 9 → 30 cm · clay

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

The snake plant comes from tropical West and Central Africa – from Nigeria via Cameroon and Gabon to the Congo, with scattered occurrences as far as Tanzania[6]. Its relatives there live in habitats ranging from dry areas with less than 250 millimetres of rain a year to humid forests[7].



ORIGIN

Nigeria, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of the Congo, DR Congo, Tanzania

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

For decades it was called *Sansevieria trifasciata*. Since DNA analyses showed that the sansevierias are nested right within the dragon trees (*Dracaena*), its official name is *Dracaena trifasciata*[8]. And why is it also called bowstring hemp? In Africa and India, the tough leaf fibres of various sansevierias were made into bowstrings, cords and mats; in the Second World War the USA even tested the snake plant as a substitute for sisal[7].

Caution

The snake plant contains saponins. For cats and dogs it is toxic: if they nibble on it, it can lead to nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea[9]. The RHS calls it poisonous and advises keeping it out of reach of children and pets. The sap can irritate the skin – best wear gloves when dividing or cutting[10].

Care

Light. Ideally bright, without harsh midday sun in summer. In darker corners it grows only very slowly[10].

Water. Better too little than too much: only water once the soil has dried out completely (finger test all the way down) – as a rule of thumb every two to three weeks in summer, often only once a month in winter. Water onto the soil, not into the leaf rosette, and tip away water in the cachepot to avoid waterlogging.

Temperature & humidity. 15–24 °C is ideal[10]; the RHS gives a minimum of 5–10 °C, so to be safe keep it above 10 °C[11]. Dry, heated air doesn't bother it – don't mist.

Soil, pot & repotting. Free-draining cactus soil, or houseplant soil with a third sand or grit[10]. As a rule of thumb, a heavy pot with a drainage hole stops the tall leaves from tipping everything over. Clay works well: the soil dries faster in it[12]. Repot only when roots fill the pot, into a pot just slightly bigger[10] – as a rule of thumb every two to four years in spring.

Feeding. From spring to early autumn about once a month with a liquid houseplant or cactus fertiliser[10]; as a rule of thumb not at all in winter.

Propagating

Larger plants can be divided when repotting: cut through the rhizome so that every piece has leaves and roots. Offsets can be separated too. With leaf cuttings, variegated varieties such as 'Laurentii' usually lose their yellow edge[7].

Extras

Sometimes it flowers: on a long stalk, greenish-white flowers open and start to smell sweet towards evening[7].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaves wrinkle, the lower ones dry up. → Water thoroughly, pour off the excess after 15 minutes.	Leaves soft or yellow, the plant leans or wobbles; the soil stays wet. → Take it out of the pot, cut off rotten parts, replant in fresh, dry cactus soil and don't water until the soil has dried out.
Light	Hardly any new leaves; leaves grow long and thin and flop over, the colour turns pale. → Move it closer to the window and water even more sparingly.	Pale yellow to brown, dry patches on the sunny side. → Move it out of the midday sun, get it used to more sun gradually. Burnt patches stay.
Warmth	Damaged leaves – often after a night at a cold window or in a draught. → Move it somewhere warmer, keep it dry, cut badly damaged leaves off at the base.	



Photo: O fungo azul, CC0

ZZ plant

The Water Hoarder *Zamioculcas zamiifolia* · also Zanzibar gem, Zamioculcas

So glossy it looks polished – or made of plastic. Under the soil it stores water for months. Ideal if you like to travel or forget to water.

What it does for you

The ZZ plant stores water in its thick rhizomes, and its waxy leaves lose hardly any through evaporation. That way it can go three to four months without watering[1]. For you, that means: holidays, a forgotten watering can – no problem. It uses water very slowly[2], so it also adds little to the humidity. Its leaves are naturally so glossy that they look polished[1].

MYTH

"The ZZ plant can do without any light at all."

FACT

It's tough: even with a fraction of the light it gets at the nursery, it keeps forming new leaves for over a year[1]. But no plant lives without light – and bright, without direct sun, it grows a little faster, though still slowly[3].

FACT SHEET

CARE	very easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	very little
HUMIDITY	dry air is fine
HEIGHT	up to approx. 1 m tall, 90 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	very slow
TEMPERATURE	ideal 20–24 °C · not below 16 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: toxic Cats: toxic Dogs: toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	cactus and succulent soil
FEEDING	every 12 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	10.5 cm → est. 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

The ZZ plant comes from eastern Africa, from Kenya and Tanzania via Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe to KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa[4]. There it grows in dry, open savanna woodland[3].



ORIGIN

Kenya, Tanzania, Malawi, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, South Africa

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

Its species name *zamiifolia* means "with leaves like *Zamia*" – a genus of cycads it isn't related to at all[5]. Clemson also links the nickname "ZZ" to its resemblance to *Zamia*[3]. In 2002 the Florida Nurserymen and Growers Association named it a Florida Plant of the Year[1].

Caution

The ZZ plant contains calcium oxalate. If leaves are eaten in larger amounts, vomiting and diarrhoea can follow. For cats and dogs it is considered moderately toxic[5] – so keep it out of reach of pets and children. Sources differ on skin contact: NC State reports no contact dermatitis, the RHS lists it as a skin and eye irritant. Wear gloves when cutting[5,6].

Care

Light. Best bright without direct sun; harsh sun scorches the leaves[5]. It copes with little light, but then grows even more slowly than it already does[3].

Water. Only water once the soil has dried out completely – once or twice a month[3], in winter about once a month[5]. It can't stand wet feet: too much water makes the roots rot[3].

Temperature & humidity. Indoors, 20–24 °C is ideal[1]. It is sensitive to cold – not below 16 °C[3]. Normal room air is enough for it[3].

Soil, pot & repotting. Coarse, free-draining soil, about half potting compost and half perlite and sand[3]. As a rule of thumb, ready-made cactus soil works too, and you repot every two to three years when the rhizomes fill the pot – only one size bigger.

Feeding. Only once or twice during the growing season[3].

Propagating

You can divide the plant[7]. A test of patience: stick single leaflets into moist soil. At their base a small rhizome forms first, then roots[1] – it takes a long time until the first shoot.

Extras

Flowers are rare: a spike in a light green bract[3]. Popular varieties: 'Raven' with almost black leaves, 'Zenzi' as a dwarf form and 'Chameleon', whose leaves come out yellow[3].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaflets drop, the plant loses its foliage when it dries out completely. → Water thoroughly, then let it dry out again.	The plant weakens, the soil stays wet, roots rot. → Take it out of the pot, cut off rotten parts, replant in fresh, dry soil and don't water until it has dried out.
Light	Hardly any new shoots, it grows even more slowly than usual. → Move it somewhere brighter. Even then, new shoots only come slowly.	Brown, scorched patches on the leaves. → Move it out of direct sun. Scorched leaflets stay patchy.
Warmth	Leaves suffer – often after cold at the window. → Move it somewhere warmer, keep it dry, cut damaged stalks off at the base.	



Photo: Husky, CC0

Chinese money plant

The Pass-It-On Plant *Pilea peperomioides* · also UFO plant, Pancake plant

Round leaves on long stalks and constant new offsets: the Chinese money plant wants bright light without harsh sun, and you water once the top of the soil has dried.

What it does for you

The round, fleshy leaves sit like little plates on long stalks, with the stalk attached in the middle of the leaf's underside[1]. At about 20–30 cm tall it fits on any windowsill, and it's considered easy-care and non-toxic to pets[1]. And it keeps producing offsets that you can separate and give away[2].

MYTH

"The Chinese money plant is a peperomia."

FACT

The species name *peperomioides* suggests it, and the round, fleshy leaves look a bit like one. Botanically, though, it belongs to the nettle family[3]. It doesn't sting anyway: the whole plant is hairless, without stinging hairs[3].

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	low
HEIGHT	up to approx. 30 cm tall, 30 cm wide · bushy
GROWTH	fast
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–24 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: non-toxic Cats: non-toxic Dogs: non-toxic
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 6 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 1–2 years
POT	est. 9 → 10.5 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild it is only known from south-west China, in Sichuan and Yunnan[4], on shady, damp rocks in forests at 1500–3000 m altitude. There it is very rare and possibly endangered[3].



ORIGIN

China

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

In 1945 a Norwegian missionary found it at a market in Yunnan and took offshoots with him to Norway when he fled. From there it travelled from hand to hand across Europe for decades, without any nurseries – it only reached garden centres recently[5].

Caution

The Chinese money plant is considered non-toxic to children and pets[1]. The ASPCA doesn't list the species itself, but rates the related *Pilea involucrata* as non-toxic to cats and dogs[6].

Care

Light. Bright, but without direct sun[7]. The RHS suggests a window facing north, east or west (south, east or west in the southern hemisphere); in a room with midday sun, set it back from the window[2].

Water. Water when the top few centimetres of soil start to dry – check with the finger test or by lifting the pot. It needs less in winter. Never leave it standing in water, or the roots will rot[2]. Keep the leaves dry if you can: wet foliage easily gets spots[1].

Temperature & humidity. 18–24 °C by day, above 13 °C at night[7], always above 10 °C and away from cold draughts[2]. Normal room air is fine, though it likes it a little more humid[1,2].

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free potting compost[2]. For faster drainage you can optionally mix in some cactus soil – Penn State suggests this for pileas that like fast drainage[7]. Check the roots every spring and repot when it gets crowded, usually every two years or so – into a pot only slightly bigger[2].

Feeding. From spring to early autumn feed with liquid fertiliser every one to two months, don't overfeed[2].

Propagating

Offsets grow all around the mother plant. Once they're big enough, separate them and pot them up individually[2]. Stem cuttings root too; both work best in spring and early summer[1].

Extras

Indoors it rarely flowers[1]. White specks under the leaves are usually harmless mineral deposits or sap that has leaked out when temperatures fluctuate[2]. The main pests are spider mites, mealybugs, fungus gnats and scale insects[1]. The RHS has given it the Award of Garden Merit[8].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	The leaves curl or pucker. → Water thoroughly as soon as the top few centimetres of soil are dry.	Leaves curl, the roots rot. → Let the soil dry out, tip away water in the cachepot, water less often.
Light	Long, thin stalks, the plant gets leggy, leaves curl. → Move it somewhere brighter, e.g. right at a window with morning or evening sun.	The leaves turn reddish brown. → Take it out of direct sun or move it a little away from the sunny window.
Fertiliser	Leaves turn yellow between the veins. → Feed with liquid fertiliser every four to eight weeks from spring to early autumn.	



Photo: Leo Michels, Public domain

Christmas cactus

The Winter Bloomer *Schlumbergera truncata* · also Holiday cactus, Schlumbergera

A cactus without spines that flowers in the middle of winter. It comes from the rainforest, so it wants water and no harsh sun – and a cool, dark autumn to set buds.

What it does for you

The Christmas cactus flowers when hardly anything else does: from late autumn into midwinter, in red, pink or white[1]. It's easy to keep and can live to a great age – the more shoots it forms over the years, the more flowers it carries[1]. And it's non-toxic to people, cats and dogs[2,3].

MYTH

"A cactus needs blazing sun and hardly any water."

FACT

Not this one. The Christmas cactus comes from tropical rainforests, where it grows in partial shade in humid warmth. Unlike desert cacti such as the mammillaria, it belongs out of harsh sun, wants regular water and prefers humid air[1].

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	medium
SHOOT LENGTH	up to approx. 45 cm long, 60 cm wide · trailing
GROWTH	medium
TEMPERATURE	ideal 16–21 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: non-toxic Cats: non-toxic Dogs: non-toxic
SOIL	cactus and succulent soil
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 1–2 years
POT	est. 9 → 19 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild, the Christmas cactus and its relatives grow only in humid mountain forests of south-eastern Brazil[4]. There they perch as epiphytes in the forks of tree branches[4].



ORIGIN

Brazil

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

The "true" Christmas cactus, *Schlumbergera* × *buckleyi*, is a hybrid that William Buckley bred at an English nursery in the 1840s[3]. Most plants on sale, though, are *S. truncata* or its hybrids – recognisable by small pointed teeth on the stem segments instead of rounded notches[4]. It used to be called *Zygocactus truncatus*[4].

Caution

It isn't toxic to cats and dogs[2], and it's considered non-toxic to people as well[5,3].

Care

Light. Bright, but not in full sun; a window with morning sun is good[1]. Harsh sun bleaches the shoots[3].

Water. In spring and summer keep it moist but never wet. From early autumn, water more sparingly and let the top few centimetres dry until buds show; then water regularly again until the flowers fade, and rest it again after flowering[1].

Temperature & humidity. 18–20 °C in summer, never below 10 °C. It doesn't mind humid air: mist it or stand it on wet gravel[1].

Soil, pot & repotting. Cactus soil[1]. Repot every one to two years in early spring, into a pot only slightly bigger[1]. Kept a little snug, it flowers more[6].

Feeding. Liquid fertiliser from spring to early autumn[1], about once a month[3].

Propagating

In late spring, snap off two or three segments from a shoot tip and let them dry for a day or two. Then push them about 1 cm deep into a mix of seed compost and sand, keep them bright without sun and water sparingly – after 3 to 12 weeks they have roots[1].

Extras

It's a short-day plant: it forms buds after about six weeks of long nights – 13 to 16 hours of darkness, depending on the source[6,4]. So from early autumn, keep it cool at 12–15 °C and away from lamplight in the evening. If it gets warmer than 18 °C, it flowers late or not at all[1]. Buds drop with fluctuating temperatures, overwatering or too dry soil, or when you move the plant while buds are forming[1,4].

It only forms flowers at the shoot tips. For a bushier plant, snap a few end segments off long shoots in spring after flowering – more shoots mean more flowers[1].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Stem segments shrivel, buds drop. → Water thoroughly, pour away the excess. In spring and summer never let the soil dry out completely.	Shoots shrivel despite wet soil, roots rot, buds drop. → Let the soil dry out and don't leave the pot standing in water.
Light		Stem segments turn pale, discoloured or get scorched patches. → Take it out of the midday sun.
Warmth	Buds drop, e.g. after the trip home from a cold shop or in a draught. → Keep it evenly bright and cool, but above 10 °C, and don't move it while buds are forming.	



Photo: George E. Koronaios, CC BY-SA 4.0

Moth orchid

The Long Bloomer *Phalaenopsis* · also Phalaenopsis

The supermarket orchid is no diva: it likes it as warm as you do, grows in bark instead of soil and flowers for months – with a little skill, again every year.

What it does for you

The moth orchid, also simply called Phalaenopsis after its genus, is the most popular orchid for the home[1]. Its flowers often last four months and longer[1], and it copes well with heated rooms[2]. On top of that, it is non-toxic for people, cats and dogs[3,4].

MYTH

"Watering with ice cubes harms the tropical plant."

FACT

No. In one trial, orchids in bark got three ice cubes or the same amount of water every week. The flowers lasted just as long, the bark only cooled to about 11 °C, and the roots weren't harmed[5]. You don't need ice cubes, though – the RHS recommends tepid water[2].

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	medium
HEIGHT	up to approx. 60 cm tall, 50 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	slow
TEMPERATURE	ideal 19–30 °C · not below 13 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: non-toxic Cats: non-toxic Dogs: non-toxic
SOIL	orchid substrate
FEEDING	every 2 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	12 cm → est. 14 cm · clear

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild, the genus grows in tropical and subtropical Asia as far as north-eastern Australia[6]. There it grows on trees as an epiphyte[6,1].



ORIGIN

India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Cambodia, Vietnam, China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Republic of, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Australia

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

The genus name *Phalaenopsis* means "moth-like" – the flowers resemble moths in flight[1,7]. It is bred mainly in Taiwan and the Netherlands, and more than 34,000 hybrids are registered[1].

Caution

It isn't toxic for cats and dogs[3], and for people it's considered harmless[4].

Care

Light. Bright in winter, a window with morning or evening sun is ideal. No direct sun in summer, it burns the leaves[2].

Water. In the growing season, water thoroughly with lukewarm water about once a week or dunk briefly and let it drain well. Too wet and the roots rot, too dry and they shrivel up[2].

Temperature & humidity. 19–30 °C by day, 16–19 °C at night[2]; the RHS advises keeping it above 16 °C, and Iowa State says to avoid anything below 13 °C[8]. It likes 40–60 % humidity – a tray of wet gravel helps[8].

Soil, pot & repotting. Only bark-based orchid mix, never potting compost. A clear pot shows whether it's still moist inside. Don't bury aerial roots, or they rot[2]. Repot into fresh bark every two to three years after flowering, not while in bloom[1,7,9].

Feeding. From spring into early autumn[9], twice a month with orchid fertiliser at half strength[1], every fourth time just water; hardly at all in winter[2].

Propagating

Sometimes an offset grows from a node on the flower stalk. Once it has several strong roots, cut it off and pot it in orchid mix. Water sparingly at first, but mist the leaves every day[2].

Extras

After flowering, cut the stalk above the second node below the faded flowers – a new flower branch often sprouts there[2]. If it goes without flowers for a long time, keep it around 5 °C cooler for about a month[2].

Its roots are green because they photosynthesise themselves[1]. The leaves use water-saving CAM photosynthesis and take in CO_2 mainly at night[10].

By the way, blue orchids are usually dyed. When they flower again, the flowers are white[1].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	The roots shrivel and die. → Water the pot thoroughly or dunk it, then water weekly. Never let the bark dry out completely.	Roots rot, leaves shrivel anyway. → Take it out of the pot, cut off rotten roots, replant in fresh bark. After that, only water once the bark has dried a little.
Light	It doesn't flower again. → Especially in winter, move it to a bright window, one with morning sun, say.	Leaves get burnt patches. → In summer, move it out of direct sun, behind a net curtain, say.
Fertiliser	Little new growth. → In the growing season, feed every two weeks with orchid fertiliser at half strength.	
Warmth	Buds drop after sudden temperature changes, leaves touching a cold window get damaged. → Keep it above 16 °C at night if possible, never below 13 °C. Not against the cold glass, no draughts.	The plant is healthy but doesn't send up a new flower stalk. → For about a month, move it to a spot that is around 5 °C cooler.



Photo: Surtsicna, CC BY 4.0

Pincushion cactus

The Flower Crown *Mammillaria* · also Mammillaria

Small, spiny and undemanding: the pincushion cactus wants lots of sun, little water and a cool, dry winter. In return, it thanks you with a ring of flowers.

What it does for you

Pincushion cacti stay small – popular species such as *M. zeilmanniana* and *M. elongata* only grow 10 to 15 cm tall[1,2] – and fit on any sunny windowsill. Their funnel-shaped flowers usually appear as a ring around the crown[1], white, yellow, pink or red depending on the species[3]. Dry, heated air doesn't bother them[4], and they are considered non-toxic[3].

MYTH

"A cactus next to your screen soaks up radiation."

FACT

Sadly not. Researchers in Korea and Turkey measured the fields of monitors with and without cacti: the plants had no effect on the magnetic fields[5,6]. They reduced electric fields so little that it makes practically no difference[5]. Potted plants don't measurably clean the air either[7].

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	full sun
WATER	very little
HUMIDITY	dry air is fine
HEIGHT	up to approx. 15 cm tall, 20 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	slow
TEMPERATURE	ideal 21–27 °C · not below 5 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: non-toxic Cats: non-toxic Dogs: non-toxic
SOIL	cactus and succulent soil
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 → 21 cm · shallow, clay

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild, pincushion cacti grow from the southern USA through Mexico and Central America to Colombia and Venezuela, and on many Caribbean islands[8]. The name comes from the Latin *mammilla*, "nipple" – meaning the tubercles that cover the body[3].



ORIGIN

United States, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Colombia, Venezuela, Bahamas, Turks and Caicos Islands, Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba, Curaçao

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

The genus has around 150 species[3], and many of them are sold in shops: the pink-flowering *M. zeilmanniana*, say, *M. plumosa* wrapped in white spines, or *M. elongata* with finger-shaped stems. They're all cared for the same way[1,9,2].

Caution

Pincushion cacti are considered non-toxic for people[3]; the ASPCA lists *M. fragilis* as non-toxic for cats and dogs[10]. The spines can hurt you, though[3]. To handle them, use an oven glove or a strip of folded newspaper[4].

Care

Light. Full sun, on a sunny windowsill all year round[4,1]. In high summer it tolerates a little afternoon shade[3].

Water. In spring and summer, water thoroughly once the soil is dry and let the water drain away[3,4]. From late autumn to early spring, give only enough to keep it from shrivelling. Rainwater is best[4].

Temperature & humidity. Warm in summer, around 21–27 °C[3], cool in winter at 8–10 °C at night[4]. It can't take frost[1]. Dry air suits it fine[4].

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free cactus soil in a pot that isn't too big – otherwise the soil stays wet for too long[4]. Shallow clay pots dry out faster[11]. Repot every two to three years in spring[3,4].

Feeding. From spring to early autumn once a month with cactus fertiliser or a potassium-rich liquid feed such as tomato fertiliser[4].

Propagating

Over time, many pincushion cacti form clumps of offsets. Once they have their own roots, separate them and pot them up individually[4,3]. Sow seeds in early spring at 19–24 °C[1] – it can take up to a year until the seedlings are ready to prick out[4].

Extras

A cool, almost dry winter rest and as much light as possible all year help it to flower[4]. This is exactly where it's the opposite of the Christmas cactus: that one comes from the rainforest, flowers in winter and then wants regular water[4].

The most common pests are mealybugs[1,3].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	The body shrivels, hardly grows or becomes misshapen. → In spring and summer, water thoroughly as soon as the soil is dry. In winter only if it shrivels.	Soft, rotting patches, blisters on the skin, hardly any growth. → Let the soil dry out completely, don't leave water in the cachepot. Keep it almost dry in winter.
Light	It grows weak and misshapen and hardly flowers. → Move it to the brightest, sunniest window and get it used to the sun slowly.	Brown patches on the skin that shrink and scab over (corky scab). → Change conditions slowly – shade it in the afternoon on hot days.
Fertiliser	Hardly any growth in summer and few flowers. → From spring to early autumn, feed once a month with cactus fertiliser or a potassium-rich liquid feed.	
Warmth	Discoloured patches on the skin, parts die off. → Keep it frost-free and above 5 °C. In winter cool but dry – about 8–10 °C at night.	



Photo: Tangopaso, Public domain

Aloe vera

The Sun Worshipper *Aloe vera* · also Aloe, True aloe

Thick, toothed leaves full of gel, plus plenty of offsets. It wants the sunniest spot you have – and water only once the soil is completely dry.

What it does for you

Aloe vera is a succulent: it stores a clear gel in its thick leaves[1]. People have used it as a medicinal plant for thousands of years – the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Indians and Chinese all knew it[2]. And it's considered one of the easiest plants of all to grow[2], as long as it gets enough sun[3].

MYTH

"Aloe vera heals almost everything – inside and out."

FACT

For gel on the skin there is some evidence: it may help burns heal faster and ease pain. For most other uses the evidence isn't enough. The bitter latex under the leaf skin is a laxative – in 2002 the USA required manufacturers to remove it from over-the-counter laxatives because safety data was missing. A whole-leaf extract is considered possibly carcinogenic[4]. So: gel on minor burns, yes; drinking aloe, better not.

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	full sun
WATER	very little
HUMIDITY	dry air is fine
HEIGHT	up to approx. 60 cm tall, 60 cm wide · rosette
GROWTH	medium
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–27 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: mildly toxic Cats: mildly toxic Dogs: mildly toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	cactus and succulent soil
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, late spring to late summer
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 → 19 cm · clay

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

True *Aloe vera* only grows wild in the Hajar Mountains in northern Oman, in deserts and dry scrubland[5] (older sources say Africa[2]). Because it is so easy to transplant and has been used medicinally for over 6,000 years, its exact origin was unclear for a long time[2].



ORIGIN

Oman

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

Today it is naturalised in more than 70 countries and regions[5]. The Spanish brought it to South America and the Caribbean[2].

Caution

The gel is considered edible, but the leaves contain saponins and anthraquinones: cats and dogs may vomit, become lethargic and get diarrhoea[6]. In humans the latex causes stomach cramps and diarrhoea, and it irritates the skin[1]. So keep it out of reach of pets and children and wear gloves when repotting[7].

Care

Light. Full sun, ideally right at a south- or west-facing window (southern hemisphere: north or west)[2]. In shade it doesn't grow well[3]. In summer it can go outside – get it used to full sun slowly.

Water. Let the soil dry out completely between waterings[1], then water thoroughly[2]. In winter only very sparingly[7]. Constantly wet soil makes the roots rot[1].

Temperature & humidity. Normal room temperature is fine. It can't take frost – ideally keep it above 10 °C; the RHS gives 5–10 °C as its minimum[7]. It dislikes humid air[3], so dry, heated air suits it.

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free cactus soil[7] in a pot with a large drainage hole[2] – clay is ideal[1]. As a rule of thumb, repot every two to three years, once the offsets fill the pot.

Feeding. From late spring to late summer once a month with liquid fertiliser[7].

Propagating

Large plants form offsets at the base. Once they are a few centimetres tall, cut them off with a clean knife. Let the cut dry for about a week, then pot them up – after about a month they have roots[2].

Extras

Its flowers are borne on stalks up to 90 cm long, with greenish-yellow tubular flowers[7]. For the gel: cut off a mature leaf, slice it open and spread the gel or sap onto a minor burn[4] or an insect bite[2].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaves wilt. → Water thoroughly, then let the soil dry out completely before the next watering.	Leaves turn yellowish and wilt, the roots rot. → Take it out of the pot, cut away rotten parts, replant in fresh cactus soil and keep it moderately dry.
Light	Growth gets weak, thin and soft, the leaves pale, new leaves small. → Move it to the sunniest window, get it used to more sun slowly.	Leaves turn yellowish or get spots, especially after a sudden move into full sun. → Get it used to the sun gradually.
Fertiliser		Brown, dry leaf tips, white crusts on the soil. → Flush the soil thoroughly with water several times, then feed less.
Warmth	Leaves wilt and bend down – after frost or a cold night outdoors. → Bring it somewhere warm (above 10 °C) right away, cut off damaged leaves.	



Photo: Neoneo (Italian Wikipedia), CC BY-SA 3.0

Dracaena

The Palm Look-Alike *Dracaena reflexa var. angustifolia* · also Dragon tree, Madagascar dragon tree

A slender trunk topped with a tuft of narrow, red-edged leaves: the dracaena brings a touch of palm to your room, copes with little light and grows at a leisurely pace.

What it does for you

Several species are sold as dragon trees, such as *Dracaena marginata* and *Dracaena fragrans*[1]. This page is about *D. marginata* with its narrow, red-edged leaves. It's considered relatively undemanding, especially when it comes to light, and with its slender trunk it looks almost like a palm[2]. Because it copes with less light, it's often found in homes and offices[3].

MYTH

"The dracaena filters pollutants from the air – NASA proved it."

FACT

Dracaenas really were part of the 1989 NASA study – but it tested them in small, airtight chambers[4]. In real homes, normal ventilation alone exchanges the air much faster than potted plants could filter out pollutants. For a noticeable effect you'd need, depending on the study, ten to a thousand plants per square metre[5].

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	little
HUMIDITY	medium
HEIGHT	up to approx. 2 m tall, 60 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	slow
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–30 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: mildly toxic Cats: mildly toxic Dogs: mildly toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 → 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

The Madagascar dragon tree grows as a shrub or small tree in the humid tropics of Madagascar and the islands of the western Indian Ocean – from Mauritius and Réunion to the Comoros and Seychelles[6,7].



ORIGIN

Madagascar, Mauritius, Comoros, Seychelles, British Indian Ocean Territory

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

Its name is confusing: in the trade, *D. marginata* is used for different species[2]; its correct botanical name today is *Dracaena reflexa* var. *angustifolia*[6,7]. Since DNA analyses, the snake plant belongs to the dracaenas too[8]. The most famous relative is the true dragon tree (*D. draco*) of the Canary Islands, which grows up to 18 metres tall there[2]. Its red sap is called dragon's blood[8] – such red resins were used as dye, varnish and medicine[9].

Caution

All parts of the dracaena are toxic[1]. It contains saponins: if cats or dogs nibble on it, they may vomit, drool and lose their appetite, and in cats the pupils dilate[10]. For people it's considered mildly toxic; it can irritate the mouth and stomach, and sap on the skin can cause irritation[7].

Care

Light. Bright, but without harsh sun – e.g. at a window with morning or evening sun; summer sun scorches the leaves[1]. It tolerates less light, but then the top turns towards the window – turn the pot now and then[2].

Water. Only water once the top 5 cm are dry (finger test)[1], then thoroughly and not with cold water[3]. As a very rough rule of thumb, that's about every one to two weeks in summer, less often in winter. Tip away water in the saucer[2] – waterlogging makes the roots rot[1]. It's sensitive to fluoride[7]; rainwater or filtered water is kinder to the leaves[1].

Temperature & humidity. It grows best at 18–30 °C[1]; a little cooler at night is fine, about 10–16 °C[3]. The RHS says it needs at least 18 °C for good growth and gets damaged below 5 °C; too close to the radiator the leaves turn brown[8]. As a safe margin, don't let it drop below 10 °C. It likes humid air[1]. If humidity drops below 30–40 % in winter, mist it now and then[3].

Soil, pot & repotting. Free-draining, slightly acidic houseplant soil with some bark and only a little perlite[1] – Clemson warns against a lot of it, because of the fluoride[3]. Use a pot with a drainage hole. Repot every two to three years in spring, into a pot only slightly bigger[1].

Feeding. From spring to early autumn about once a month with liquid foliage plant fertiliser[3,1]. Too much fertiliser turns leaf tips and edges brown[3].

Propagating

If it gets too tall, cut the trunk at the height you want – new leaves soon sprout below the cut[3]. The cut-off top roots as a cutting, best in spring or late summer[3]; warmth from below helps[1].

Extras

Indoors it grows to just under two metres over the years – that takes a while, because it grows slowly[7]. Besides the green form there are colourful varieties such as 'Tricolor', 'Colorama' and 'Sunray'[1].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Tips and edges turn brown and dry. → Water thoroughly, pour off the excess. Then check the top few centimetres regularly.	Leaves turn brown and die, the roots rot. → Let the soil dry out, don't leave water standing in the saucer and only water again once the top 5 cm are dry.
Light	The top leans towards the window. → Move it somewhere brighter and turn the pot regularly.	Brown, dry patches and tips. → Take it out of direct sun, especially in summer.
Fertiliser		Yellow or brown leaf tips and edges. → Don't feed for a while, then only about once a month in the growing season.
Warmth	Suddenly lots of leaves drop or the tips turn brown – often after cold draughts. → Move it somewhere warmer and draught-free, keep it away from cold windows in winter.	



Parlour palm

The Shade Palm *Chamaedorea elegans* · also Neanthe bella palm, Good luck palm, Chamaedorea

A palm for the spot where no palm should grow: small, slow and content with little light. The Victorians already kept it in their parlours.

What it does for you

The parlour palm is one of several palms that are easy indoors and tolerate fairly low light[1]. It grows slowly and stays compact – usually 30–60 centimetres[2]. The ASPCA lists it as non-toxic for cats and dogs[3].

MYTH

"The parlour palm cleans the air."

FACT

Even NC State writes that it removes indoor pollutants[4]. The famous NASA study from 1989 didn't test it, only its relative, the bamboo palm *Chamaedorea seifrizii*[5] – and that in small, airtight chambers. In real homes, normal ventilation exchanges the air much faster than potted plants could filter it[6]. For a noticeable effect you'd need, depending on the study, ten to a thousand plants per square metre[6].

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	medium
HEIGHT	up to approx. 1.5 m tall, est. 90 cm wide · bushy
GROWTH	slow
TEMPERATURE	ideal 20–27 °C · not below 16 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: mildly toxic Cats: non-toxic Dogs: non-toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to mid-autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	9 cm → est. 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

It grows wild from Mexico to Honduras[7], in the shade of larger trees in the rainforest[2]. A study in south-eastern Mexico harvested leaves from wild populations: they stayed roughly stable, but heavier harvesting meant fewer fruits[8].



ORIGIN

Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

In Victorian times it took pride of place in the parlour – hence its name[2]. NC State also lists it as neanthe bella palm[4]; *Neanthe bella* is a synonym of its botanical name[7].

Caution

The ASPCA lists the parlour palm as non-toxic for cats and dogs[3]. For people the sources differ: UNL lists it as non-toxic[9], NC State as low in toxicity – the only problem it names is skin irritation from the fruit juice[4]. We use the more cautious rating. The fruit pulp of a number of palms contains calcium oxalate crystals; for most *Chamaedorea*, wear gloves when handling the fruits[10].

Care

Light. Bright, indirect light is best; in partial shade it grows more slowly. Direct sun scorches the fronds[2]. It even manages away from the window[1].

Water. Water when the surface is dry, ideally with rainwater at room temperature; hard tap water can turn the fronds brown. Don't leave it standing in water for long, and water less in winter[2] – as a rule of thumb about once a week in summer.

Temperature & humidity. Ideal is 20–27 °C from spring to autumn; it tolerates cooler winters[2]. The RHS growing guide names 10 °C as the lower limit[2], its palm guide and Clemson give 16 °C as the winter minimum for this palm[1,11] – to be safe, keep it above 16 °C. On humidity the sources differ: from no need for high humidity[2] and low to medium[4] to moderate to high (Clemson, for parlour palms)[11] and "humid conditions are necessary"[1] – medium is a fair middle. Dry air browns the tips; regular misting helps and deters spider mites[2].

Soil, pot & repotting. Light, free-draining, peat-free ericaceous (acidic) compost with some grit[2]. Repot in spring once the roots are crowded, only a couple of centimetres bigger – too big a pot risks root rot[2]. Every other year is enough[4]; for palms in general, Clemson says every two to three years[11]. In the years between, replace the top 5 cm of compost with fresh[1].

Feeding. A balanced liquid feed once a month from spring to autumn[2]. For palms in general, the RHS says fortnightly[1], Clemson two to three times a year with slow-release palm fertiliser[11]. Too much fertiliser browns the leaf tips[11].

Propagating

Growers often put three or more plants in one pot[4]; a clump with several stems can be divided[2]. Seeds take patience: they can keep germinating for over a year[10].

Extras

The parlour palm is dioecious: black fruits only form when female flowers are pollinated by a male plant[2]. Only mature plants flower[12], bright light may encourage it[2], fruits rarely form indoors[4].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Brown, dry leaf tips. → Water thoroughly as soon as the surface is dry. Mist regularly in heated rooms.	Fronds turn brown; in wet soil the roots rot. → Let the surface dry before watering, tip away water from the saucer after a short while.
Light	Fronds turn yellow, the plant hardly grows. → Move it somewhere brighter, but out of direct sun.	Scorched, brown patches on the fronds. → Move it out of direct sun.
Fertiliser	Poor growth although light and water are right. → From spring to autumn feed once a month with liquid fertiliser.	The tips of the lower fronds turn brown and die. → Feed less often – monthly in the growing season is plenty.
Warmth	Reddish-brown, dead patches on the fronds a few days after a cold spell or draught. → Move it somewhere warmer, away from cold draughts at windows and doors.	



Heartleaf philodendron

The Low-Light Climber *Philodendron hederaceum* · also Sweetheart plant

Glossy, heart-shaped leaves on long, slender stems – trailing from a shelf or climbing a moss pole. It copes with little light and is often confused with pothos.

What it does for you

The heartleaf philodendron is perhaps the most popular philodendron sold today[1]. It can survive for long periods in extremely low light[2]. Its stems trail from a high shelf or climb a moss pole[3]. It was part of the 1989 NASA study, tested for formaldehyde in a sealed chamber[4]. But in real homes, for a noticeable effect you'd need, depending on the study, ten to a thousand plants per square metre[5].

MYTH

"Heartleaf philodendron and pothos are the same plant."

FACT

They are often confused[2]. But they belong to different genera: pothos is *Epipremnum aureum*[6]. Look at new growth: the philodendron has conspicuous stipules there and messy, falling ones on older growth, and its leaf stalks are not grooved[2]. Its new leaves emerge bronze and soon turn green[2].

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	low
SHOOT LENGTH	up to approx. 1.2 m long, est. 1.2 m wide · trailing
GROWTH	fast
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–27 °C · not below 15 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: toxic Cats: toxic Dogs: toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	orchid substrate houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 → 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

It grows wild from Mexico through Central America and the Caribbean to Peru, Bolivia and Brazil, as an epiphyte, mainly in the wet tropics[7].



ORIGIN

Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Suriname, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Cayman Islands, Jamaica, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Tobago

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

The genus name comes from Greek for "to love" and "tree", as many species climb trees; *hederaceum* means ivy-like[1]. Older names are *Philodendron scandens* and *P. oxycardium*[2]; POWO now files both under varieties of *P. hederaceum*[8,9]. It may also be labelled *Philodendron cordatum*, an older, inaccurate name[10].

Caution

It contains insoluble calcium oxalates; in cats and dogs it causes pain and swelling of the mouth, tongue and lips, heavy drooling, vomiting and difficulty swallowing[11]. NC State rates the poison severity for people as low, but lists contact dermatitis[2]. The RHS calls philodendrons poisonous, says the sap can irritate the skin and advises gloves[3]; the University of Zurich's veterinary toxicology database lists the whole plant as poisonous[12]. We use the more cautious rating.

Care

The RHS, Iowa State and the UF/IFAS production guide give their advice for philodendrons in general.

Light. Bright but indirect light; direct summer sun can scorch the leaves. With too little light it gets leggy and makes fewer, smaller leaves[3].

Water. Wait until the top of the compost has dried, and never leave it standing in water – saturated compost can eventually rot the roots[3]. Water less from autumn to late winter[1]. Trailing philodendrons are very unforgiving of overwatering[10]. As a rule of thumb, that means about once a week in summer.

Temperature & humidity. At least 15 °C, away from hot radiators and cold draughts; it's happy with the lower humidity of most homes[3]. 18–27 °C is well tolerated[13]. UF/IFAS lists lower leaves turning yellow after several hours at 1–4 °C among the problems of philodendrons in production and indoors[14].

Soil, pot & repotting. A loose, free-draining, slightly acidic mix, such as two parts orchid compost to one part peat-free ericaceous compost. It can usually stay in its pot for at least a couple of years, or until the roots are densely packed. Repot in spring, into a pot only a few centimetres larger than the root ball[3]. Iowa State: repot when it is overcrowded[13].

Feeding. From spring to early autumn with a general houseplant fertiliser[3]; lightly, once or twice a month[13]. Too little nitrogen makes the leaves yellowish and small[14].

Propagating

From spring to late summer, cut a piece of stem about 10 cm long just below a leaf joint, strip off the lower leaves and stand it in a glass of water – it roots in a couple of weeks[3].

Extras

Climbing a support outdoors, its leaves grow up to 30 cm long or more[15]. In cultivation it rarely flowers[2]. Cultivars include 'Brasil' with a yellow to light green central stripe and the yellow to chartreuse 'Lemon Lime'[2].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water		Yellowing leaves, leaves drop, the vines wither; roots rot. → Let the surface dry out between waterings. Never leave it standing in water, and don't water more.
Light	Leggy stems with fewer, smaller leaves. → Move it somewhere brighter, but out of direct sun.	Discoloured or scorched leaves. → Move it out of direct sun.
Fertiliser	Yellowish leaves that stay small. → Feed about once a month from spring to early autumn.	
Warmth	The lower leaves turn yellow after several hours just above freezing. → Keep it above 15 °C and away from cold draughts.	



Monstera

The Jungle Giant *Monstera deliciosa* · also Swiss cheese plant

Huge leaves full of holes and long aerial roots – the monstera brings the jungle into your living room. With enough light and a moss pole, it'll grow over your head.

What it does for you

The monstera is a climbing plant from the rainforest, where it scrambles high up into the canopy. Its leaves grow up to 45 cm wide[1]. The holes only come with age: young plants have small, entire leaves[1]. And it's the only ornamental arum that is also grown for its fruit[1].

MYTH

"We know why the leaves have holes."

FACT

Nobody knows for sure. That the holes let storms pass through is only a theory, and nobody has shown it[1]. A 2013 model suggests another reason: in the dark understorey the plant lives on brief patches of sunlight, and holes reduce the swings in its growth[2]. That is a testable hypothesis, not a proven fact.

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	medium
HEIGHT	up to approx. 2.4 m tall, est. 1.5 m wide · climbing
GROWTH	fast
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–25 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: toxic Cats: toxic Dogs: toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free) standard potting compost
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 1–2 years
POT	est. 9 → 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

According to POWO, the monstera grows wild in southern Mexico and in Guatemala[3]. Without support it creeps along the ground; with a tree it climbs nine metres and higher[4].



ORIGIN

Mexico, Guatemala

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

It was already being grown in England in 1752[4]. It used to be classed as a *Philodendron*[1] – and is still sold as split-leaf or cutleaf philodendron[5].

Caution

All parts except the flesh of the ripe fruit are toxic[1]. Even the ripe fruit irritates the throat in some people, and the floral remnants on it can irritate mouth and skin – if you try it, start with a small piece[4]. Chewing on it causes intense burning in the mouth, tongue and lips; cats and dogs drool, vomit and have trouble swallowing[5]. The sap irritates skin and eyes – wear gloves when cutting[6].

Care

Light. Bright light; in winter direct sun is fine[1]. In summer, the RHS recommends bright, indirect light[6]; UConn gives 3–6 hours of direct sun a day[7]. With too little light, the leaves get no holes[1]. Get it used to more sun slowly, or the leaves burn[7].

Water. Water when the top 5 cm (2 in) are dry[7], then thoroughly; less in winter[1]. As a rule of thumb, about once a week in summer. Too much water makes the roots rot[7].

Temperature & humidity. Warm room temperature. Below 10 °C it stops growing. Medium to high humidity – if the air is too dry, the leaf edges turn brown[1].

Soil, pot & repotting. Rich, free-draining soil[7]. A moss pole kept moist gives the aerial roots support and water[1]. It often needs a new pot[1] – but only once the roots reach the bottom and sides, and only one size bigger[7].

Feeding. Once a month during the growing season[6].

Propagating

Cut off a piece of stem just below a node, with as many aerial roots as possible, and plant it in soil[7]. This works all year round[1].

Extras

Indoor plants hardly ever flower[1]. From flower to ripe fruit takes 12 to 14 months. Ripe, the fruit tastes of pineapple and banana; unripe, it irritates the mouth and throat[4].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Growth slows down, the leaf edges turn brown (dry air does that too). → Water thoroughly, then check more regularly.	Drops of water form on the leaf edges, the roots rot. → Water less, empty the cachepot, remove rotten roots and replant in fresh soil.
Light	New leaves get no holes. → Move it somewhere brighter, in winter happily with direct sun.	Burnt patches – often after a move into harsh sun or onto the balcony. → Get it used to the sun slowly, no harsh midday sun in summer.
Fertiliser	The plant grows slowly in the growing season. → Feed once a month from spring to early autumn.	Brown, burnt leaf edges – monstera is easily burned by salts in the soil. → Flush the soil thoroughly, don't feed for a few months.
Warmth	Stops growing, the leaves are damaged. → Move it somewhere warmer, not below 10 °C and away from cold windows.	



Photo: CesarAlbertoHerrera, CC0

Peace lily

The Drama Queen *Spathiphyllum wallisii* · also Spathiphyllum

White flags above dark green leaves: the peace lily flowers indoors too and lets its leaves droop as soon as it's thirsty – a plant can't ask for water any more clearly.

What it does for you

The peace lily is one of the few foliage plants that still flower in fairly low light[1] – in deep shade, though, it rarely flowers[2]. The white "flower" is actually a bract wrapped around a spike of tiny flowers[3]. And it shows you when it's thirsty: it lets all its leaves droop – water it quickly and it recovers fast[2].

MYTH

"The peace lily is one of the best air purifiers – even NASA says so."

FACT

The 1989 NASA study really did test the peace lily – but in airtight chambers of at most one cubic metre. The authors concluded that the root zone with its soil microbes seemed to be the most effective part[4]. In homes, normal ventilation alone exchanges the air much faster than potted plants can filter out pollutants. For a noticeable effect you'd need, depending on the study, ten to a thousand plants per square metre[5].

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	medium
HEIGHT	up to approx. 90 cm tall, 90 cm wide · bushy
GROWTH	medium
TEMPERATURE	ideal 20–24 °C · not below 15 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: toxic Cats: toxic Dogs: toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 6 weeks, spring to mid-autumn
REPOTTING	every 1–2 years
POT	est. 9 → 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

There are many varieties on sale, from 30 centimetres to over a metre tall[3]. The one sold most often is *Spathiphyllum wallisii*[2] – and that's the species this page is about. The sizes on the fact sheet are those of typical shop plants and larger cultivars; the pure species stays at about 30–40 cm[1,6]. In the wild it grows in Colombia and Venezuela[7]. The genus lives in the understorey of humid rainforests in Central and South America, a few species also in South-East Asia[3].



ORIGIN

Colombia, Venezuela

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

The name "peace lily" comes from the bracts, which look like white flags[2]. It isn't a true lily, though, but a member of the arum family[1].

Caution

The peace lily contains calcium oxalate crystals. Chewing on it causes severe pain and burning in the lips, tongue and throat[6]. Cats and dogs drool, vomit and have trouble swallowing[8]. So keep it out of reach of children and pets. NC State lists no contact dermatitis[6], but the RHS warns that the sap can irritate the skin[2] – wear gloves when cutting.

Care

Light. Ideally bright without direct sun, which burns the leaves. It tolerates low light[1], but then grows slowly and hardly flowers[2].

Water. Water as soon as the top centimetres of soil are dry, less in winter[2] – as a rule of thumb about once a week in summer. Never leave it standing in water, or the roots rot[1]. If it droops, a thorough watering helps within hours. If that happens often, the leaf edges turn brown[3].

Temperature & humidity. Normal room temperature suits it: the RHS names 12–24 °C[2], Clemson up to about 29 °C by day; below about 15 °C it risks cold damage[1]. Don't put it next to a radiator or in a draught. If the air is too dry, the leaf edges turn brown – a tray of damp gravel helps[2].

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free houseplant soil with some perlite[2]. Repot in spring once roots fill the pot; freshly bought plants only after one to two years[2]. The new pot should be only slightly bigger than the root ball, otherwise the soil stays wet for too long[1].

Feeding. From spring to mid-autumn every few weeks[2], as a rule of thumb about monthly at most and at weak strength; Clemson even advises only every 6–8 weeks at quarter strength[1]. Too much fertiliser burns leaf tips and roots[3].

Propagating

Divide large plants in spring: pull the root ball apart so that every piece has roots and strong shoots, and pot them up individually[2].

Extras

Left to itself, the peace lily flowers mainly in spring and summer. The bracts last a long time and turn green with age[2]. Young plants under a year old often don't flower yet[1]. Nurseries often make it flower with the plant hormone gibberellin – at any time of year[3].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	All leaves droop limply; if this happens often, tips and edges turn brown. → Water thoroughly – within a few hours it perks up again. After that, check more often.	Leaves wilt despite wet soil, edges turn yellow or brown, roots have black tips. → Water less often, empty the cachepot, remove rotten roots and replant in fresh, loose soil.
Light	Flowers little or not at all. → Move it somewhere brighter, but without direct sun.	Leaves turn pale and get brown, burnt patches. → Move it out of direct sun to a bright, shaded spot.
Fertiliser	Hardly grows, the leaves turn yellowish – often between veins that stay green. → From spring to mid-autumn, feed every 4–8 weeks at weak strength.	Brown leaf tips and edges. → Flush the soil thoroughly, don't feed for a few months.
Warmth	Grows slowly, dead patches spread inward from the leaf tips. → Move it somewhere warmer, away from cold windows and draughts – not below 15 °C.	



Rubber plant

The Classic *Ficus elastica* · also Rubber fig, Ficus

Large, glossy leaves on a sturdy trunk: the rubber plant is a robust indoor tree that copes with a bit less light too.

What it does for you

The rubber plant is considered a robust, uncomplicated houseplant[1]. Its leathery, glossy leaves grow 30 to 45 centimetres long, often with a bronze underside[2]. Indoors it usually reaches 0.6 to 3 metres; if you cut the main shoots, it grows bushier[3].

MYTH

"The rubber plant cleans the air in your home."

FACT

The famous NASA study from 1989 tested plants in small, airtight chambers[4]. In real homes, normal ventilation alone exchanges the air much faster than potted plants could filter out pollutants. For a noticeable effect you'd need, depending on the study, ten to a thousand plants per square metre[5].

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	medium
HEIGHT	up to approx. 3 m tall, 1 m wide · upright
GROWTH	slow
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–27 °C · not below 15 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: mildly toxic Cats: toxic Dogs: toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free) standard potting compost
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to late summer
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 → 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild, the rubber plant grows from Nepal and north-east India to south-western China and western Malesia, e.g. on Sumatra and Java[6]. There it reaches up to 30 metres[3]. It often germinates as a hemiepiphyte on another tree and wraps around it with its aerial roots as a strangler fig[7].



ORIGIN

Nepal, Bhutan, India, Bangladesh, China, Myanmar, Thailand, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

Its species name *elastica* refers to the milky sap that was once used to make rubber[3]; it was grown for this before and during the colonial era[7]. In Meghalaya, India, the Khasi and Jaintia grow living bridges over rivers from its aerial roots – up to about 50 metres long and some of them several hundred years old[7].

Caution

The Bonn poison information centre classes rubber plants as mildly toxic: rarely, the milky sap irritates the mucous membranes; eating leaves has led to vomiting and stomach ache. Only after very large amounts have cramps been described[8]. For cats and dogs, the ASPCA lists irritation of the stomach, gut and skin for its close relative, the weeping fig (*Ficus benjamina*)[9]. The sticky white sap can irritate the skin and aggravate allergies – wear gloves when cutting[1].

Care

Light. Ideally bright, but filtered or indirect[2]; it tolerates a little morning or evening sun, variegated varieties need more light[1]. Partial shade works too, afternoon sun doesn't[3].

Water. In summer, water regularly with room-temperature water and let the soil dry slightly in between – as a rule of thumb, once the top 2–3 cm are dry. In winter keep it just slightly moist. Too much water is the usual reason for sudden leaf drop[1].

Temperature & humidity. Evenly warm, no draughts[1], ideally 18–27 °C; below 15 °C it risks cold damage[10]. Medium humidity[3]; in dry air a tray of damp gravel helps[1].

Soil, pot & repotting. Houseplant soil[2] or peat-free, loam-based soil with fine bark[1]. Repot every 2–3 years, and renew the top layer of soil every year in between[2].

Feeding. From spring to late summer[1] about monthly with a high-nitrogen fertiliser[2].

Propagating

The easiest way is air layering in spring or late summer[1]. Sources differ on how long it takes: the RHS reckons with about a year[1], Iowa State University with several weeks until the first roots[11]. Cuttings root best in spring or summer with bottom heat[1].

Extras

Its pink to purple stipules are typical. The most common variety is 'Robusta' with deep green, waxy leaves; there are also variegated varieties. Wipe the large leaves with a damp cloth now and then. Indoors it rarely flowers. Unpruned it grows tall, narrow and tree-like[3].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water		Leaves turn yellow and drop, the soil stays wet for a long time. → Water less often, empty the cachepot and let the soil dry slightly before the next watering.
Light	Green leaves drop. → Move it somewhere brighter, ideally with some morning or evening sun – and then leave it there.	Dry, shrivelled or scorched leaves. → Protect it from harsh midday and afternoon sun.
Fertiliser		Leaves drop even though light and watering are right. → Don't feed for a few months, then more sparingly.
Warmth	Leaves suddenly drop – often in winter or in a cold draught. → Move it somewhere warmer and draught-free, not below 15 °C.	



Spineless yucca

The Gentle Giant — *Yucca gigantea* · also Giant yucca, Soft-tip yucca, Yucca cane

A sturdy trunk, a tuft of leaves with soft tips: the spineless yucca looks like a palm but isn't one. It loves light and forgives a forgotten watering.

What it does for you

Unlike most yuccas, this one has no sharp spines at the leaf tips[1]. It's a popular, low-maintenance houseplant[1]. Gardeners' World calls it a great plant for beginners: easy, tolerant of neglect and able to cope with some direct sunshine[2].

MYTH

"The yucca is a palm."

FACT

It has a palm-like trunk, and as its lower leaves die off naturally, it looks more and more like a palm over time[2]. But it isn't one: it belongs to the asparagus family[1], Asparagaceae[3].

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	bright with some sun
WATER	little
HUMIDITY	low
HEIGHT	up to approx. 1.5 m tall, 75 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	medium
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–24 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: mildly toxic Cats: toxic Dogs: toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	standard potting compost cactus and succulent soil
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 → 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

It grows wild from central Mexico to Panama, as a tree, mainly in the seasonally dry tropics[3]. Outdoors it reaches 8–12 metres[4] – it's the tallest of the yuccas[5]. It was introduced into Florida in 1956 as a substitute for the spiny Spanish bayonet[5].



ORIGIN

Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

Its former name *Yucca elephantipes* refers to the thick trunk that resembles an elephant's foot[1]; today's accepted name is *Yucca gigantea*[3]. The genus name comes from a name for cassava (yuca), which isn't closely related[6]. NC State also calls it giant or soft-tip yucca[1], GRIN giant yucca[7], Gardeners' World yucca cane[2].

Caution

The ASPCA lists yuccas as toxic to cats and dogs: they contain saponins, the main sign is vomiting[8]. NC State rates the poison severity as low; eaten, the leaves and roots can cause nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, headaches and dizziness in people[1]. For pets we use the more cautious rating. The RHS lists it as a skin allergen and advises gloves[4]; NC State says the sap can cause minor rashes[1].

Care

Light. Yuccas need a sunny spot all year, with light shade from direct summer sun. Too little light can make the leaves sag. Turn it regularly, or it grows lopsided towards the light[9]. From late spring to late summer it can stand outside in a sheltered spot, as long as it is stable in the wind[9].

Water. Water when the top few centimetres of compost are dry, and let surplus water drain away; water more sparingly in winter[2] – as a rule of thumb every 1–2 weeks in summer. Overwatering is the bigger danger[2]: it can cause root rot[1].

Temperature & humidity. Normal indoor temperatures and humidity suit it; keep it away from cold draughts and sudden temperature changes[1]. No need to mist[2]. The minimum varies: the RHS names 10 °C for houseplants, and 7 °C at night during the winter rest[9]; NC State says to bring it in below 50 °F (10 °C)[1] – to be safe, keep it above 10 °C.

Soil, pot & repotting. Loam-based compost (John Innes No 2) with 20–30 % extra grit[9], or one part potting mix to three parts perlite or sand[1]. It does well slightly pot-bound: repot every two or three years in spring; for big plants, replace the top compost instead. A sturdy pot keeps it from toppling[2].

Feeding. The sources differ: fortnightly from spring to early autumn[9], monthly[4], or every couple of months at half strength[2]. We go with monthly; none in winter[9].

Propagating

Cut off offsets at the base in spring, let them dry for a couple of days, then root them in a warm, light spot out of direct sun[9]. Too tall? In spring, cut it back by half – there is a slight risk, but healthy plants should respond well, and the top can be rooted as a cutting[9].

Extras

Houseplants rarely flower[1]. Outdoors, mature plants carry spikes up to 1 m long with creamy-white, hanging flowers[4]. The flowers are edible and can be used in salads[5].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Crisp, brown lower leaves; sagging, droopy leaves. → Water thoroughly once the top few centimetres are dry, and let surplus water drain away.	Lower leaves suddenly turn yellow and limp; stems or roots rot. → Let it almost dry out. If roots rot, remove them and repot in a pot just big enough.
Light	Leaves sag and droop or turn pale. → Move it somewhere brighter – some direct sun is fine.	
Warmth	Damage and dieback after cold or frost. → Keep it above 10 °C, away from cold draughts and sudden temperature changes.	



Photo: User:Matthias Süßen, CC BY-SA 4.0

Amaryllis

The Comeback Queen *Hippeastrum* · also Hippeastrum

One bulb, one stalk, huge flowers in the middle of winter. And it isn't finished after flowering: with sun in summer and a cool break, it flowers again every year.

What it does for you

The amaryllis brings big flowers into winter: six to eight weeks after potting, two to six trumpets open on one stalk[1,2]. The trade stores the dormant bulbs and brings them into flower just in time for the run-up to Christmas[3].

MYTH

"After flowering, the bulb is used up."

FACT

Not true. If you let the leaves keep growing after flowering, feed it and give it a cool, dry dormancy in autumn, it flowers again the next winter – year after year[1,4].

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	bright with some sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	low
HEIGHT	up to approx. 60 cm tall, 30 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	fast

TEMPERATURE	ideal 15–21 °C · not below 7 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: highly toxic Cats: toxic Dogs: toxic
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free) standard potting compost
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, late winter to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	14 → 17 cm · deep

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

The roughly 90 species grow wild in Central and South America, above all in eastern Brazil and in the Andes[5,2].



ORIGIN

Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay, Venezuela

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

The name is a mistake with a history: Linnaeus called the plant *Amaryllis* in 1737. In 1819 William Herbert coined the name *Hippeastrum* for the American species[6]. The true *Amaryllis* is the belladonna lily from South Africa[3]. But the hippeastrum is still usually called "amaryllis"[7,4]. It has been bred since 1799, and most varieties on sale descend from six species[2].

Caution

All parts contain alkaloids such as lycorine, the bulb most of all[8]. The bulb is considered highly toxic[4]: vomiting, drooling and diarrhoea, in larger amounts seizures and heart rhythm problems[8]. It is toxic for cats and dogs too[9].

Care

Light. As bright as possible, ideally with some direct sun – that's the most important point for the next flowering[10]. Turn the pot regularly[1].

Water. Sparingly until leaves appear, then regularly, without water left in the saucer[1]. Let the top of the soil dry out[10].

Temperature & humidity. Around 21 °C to start growing, 15–18 °C in flower – then the flowers last longer[1].

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free potting compost in a pot only slightly bigger than the bulb. The sources disagree on how far the bulb should stick out: two thirds[1], half[2] or at least a third[11,10]. It flowers better a little pot-bound[10]. Repot every two to three years after flowering[1].

Feeding. After flowering until early autumn about once a month[11] – the RHS even recommends weekly[1].

Propagating

When repotting, separate bulblets that have their own roots and pot them up singly. At about 21 °C and without a rest, they flower after three to four years[1].

Extras

How to get the next flowers: cut off spent flowers, leave the leaves, water and feed; in summer it can go outside[1]. From early autumn water less or stop altogether[1] and let it rest in the dark at 7–13 °C[2] – for eight to ten weeks according to the RHS and Wisconsin, up to twelve according to Illinois[1,2,11]. Then move it somewhere bright and water again – after four to six weeks it flowers[11].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	The next winter no flower stalk appears. → After flowering let the leaves keep growing – water and feed them until early autumn.	The bulb rots. → Keep the soil only slightly moist, let the top dry out, don't leave water in the saucer.
Light	Long, soft leaves that flop over, the flower stalk leans towards the window, no flowers the next year. → Move it to the brightest window, turn the pot regularly, put it outside in the sun in summer.	The flowers fade quickly in a warm spot. → While it flowers, keep it cooler (15–18 °C) – then the flowers last longer.
Warmth		Without a cool rest the time of flowering is hard to control. → From early autumn let it rest dry for eight to ten weeks at 7–13 °C.



Dieffenbachia

The Beauty with a Bite *Dieffenbachia seguine* · also Dumb cane

Large leaves splashed with creamy white, few demands and plenty of tropical flair. But careful: all parts of the plant are toxic. For homes without small children and nibbling pets.

What it does for you

The dieffenbachia brings tropical flair into your room: large, glossy leaves patterned in cream, white or yellow depending on the variety[1]. It's considered an easy houseplant that puts up with a lot[2], and it copes with darker corners too – though it grows more slowly there[3]. It doesn't measurably clean the air: for that you'd need ten to a thousand plants per square metre[4].

MYTH

"A single bite of a dieffenbachia leaf is deadly."

FACT

It's usually not quite that dramatic: the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) expects poisonings with a less severe course for this plant[5], and most plant poisonings are mild or cause no symptoms at all[6]. It's still not harmless: if the throat swells, it can be life-threatening[2]. Respect, yes – panic, no.

FACT SHEET

CARE	easy
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	high
HEIGHT	up to approx. 1.5 m tall, 90 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	fast
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–24 °C · not below 15 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: highly toxic Cats: highly toxic Dogs: highly toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, early spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	14 cm → est. 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild, the dieffenbachia grows in the Caribbean and tropical South America, from Cuba to Bolivia and Brazil[7,8], on the shady forest floor[9]. In shops it's often sold as *D. maculata*, *D. picta* or *D. amoena* – botanically they all belong to *Dieffenbachia seguine*[1].



ORIGIN

Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cayman Islands, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Dominica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, Barbados

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

It's named after Dieffenbach, who ran the palace gardens in Vienna in the 1830s[1]. The name "dumb cane" comes from the fact that its sap can literally leave you speechless[2]. It was even misused to punish enslaved people[9].

Caution

All parts are full of needle-shaped calcium oxalate crystals[2]. Ratings of how severe a poisoning is differ – the BfR expects a moderate course, NC State rates it high[5,1] – so treat it as highly toxic. Biting into it causes burning and swelling of the lips, tongue and throat, making speaking and swallowing hard; sap in the eye can damage the cornea[1]. If the throat swells, get medical help immediately[2]. Cats and dogs drool, vomit and have trouble swallowing[10]. It's not a plant for homes with small children or pets[2]; wear gloves when cutting[8]. In an emergency: remove any remains from the mouth, give water or tea to drink, no milk, don't induce vomiting, call a poison control centre[6].

Care

Light. Bright without direct sun, which yellows or bleaches the leaves[3,1]. In winter a little sun is fine[2]. In low light it gets leggy, loses variegation and its lower leaves[8,3].

Water. Water thoroughly, then not again until the top 2–3 centimetres are dry[2] – as a rule of thumb about once a week in summer. In winter just keep it slightly moist[11]. Constantly wet soil makes the lower leaves turn yellow and the stem rot[3].

Temperature & humidity. 18–24 °C is ideal[3], not below 15 °C – a safe margin, since below about 10–13 °C it gets damaged[3,8]. It responds to draughts by dropping leaves[3]. In dry air, neighbouring plants or a tray of damp gravel help[3].

Soil, pot & repotting. Loose, free-draining houseplant soil, ideally with perlite[3]. Repot in early spring[2] – as a rule of thumb every two to three years[12].

Feeding. From early spring to early autumn every two to four weeks at half strength[2].

Propagating

Cut bare stems into 5-centimetre pieces, each with a bud, let them dry for a day and push them into moist potting compost; tip cuttings even root in water[3]. The stump sprouts again below the cut[2].

Extras

Over the years the lower leaves drop and a stem becomes visible[2]. Flowers are rare indoors and inconspicuous[3]. Popular varieties: 'Camille' with cream-yellow leaves and a green edge, 'Tropic Snow' gets by with less light[2].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaf edges and tips turn brown and dry. → Water thoroughly, then do the finger test more often.	Lower leaves turn yellow and drop, the stem goes soft at the base and rots. → Water less often, empty the cachepot. If the stem is rotten, save healthy shoot tips as cuttings.
Light	Long, bare stems, lower leaves drop, the pattern fades. → Move it somewhere brighter, but out of the midday sun. Cut back bare stems.	Leaves turn pale, yellow or discoloured. → Take it out of direct sun, give it a bright, shaded spot.
Fertiliser	Leaves turn yellowish and smaller, the plant hardly grows. → From early spring to early autumn feed at half strength every 2–4 weeks.	Brown, scorched leaf edges and tips. → Flush the soil thoroughly, don't feed for a while.
Warmth	Lower leaves suddenly drop – often after a draught or a sudden drop in temperature. → Move it somewhere warmer and sheltered, not below 15 °C, away from cold windows.	



Photo: Gabriel Collares, CC BY 4.0

African violet

The Windowsill Bloomer *Streptocarpus ionanthus* · also Saintpaulia, Kenya violet

Velvety leaves in a neat rosette, with clusters of flowers above them – in the right conditions for months on end. Small, compact and non-toxic, but particular about water.

What it does for you

Given the right conditions, the African violet can flower non-stop for months on end[1] – in proper conditions, Clemson says, even year-round[2]. Being compact, it fits even where indoor space is limited[1]. The ASPCA lists it as non-toxic for cats and dogs[3]. It doesn't measurably clean the air: depending on the study, you'd need ten to a thousand plants per square metre[4].

MYTH

"African violets are fussy divas."

FACT

Until about 1930 they were mainly grown in greenhouses. Indoors they failed, it seems partly because most homes had no central heating and were too cold in winter – so they got a reputation for being difficult[5]. Yet they like the temperatures people find comfortable and don't need constant care, just modest attention[6]. Their weak spot is water: overwatering is one of their most common problems[2].

FACT SHEET

CARE	moderate
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	medium
HEIGHT	up to approx. 23 cm tall, 23 cm wide · rosette
GROWTH	medium
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–24 °C · not below 16 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: non-toxic Cats: non-toxic Dogs: non-toxic
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, early spring to late summer
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 cm → 10.5 cm · shallow

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

The wild species grows in Kenya and Tanzania, on rocks[7]; as houseplants, thousands of cultivars are grown[8]. In 1893 Hermann Wendland named the genus *Saintpaulia* after Baron Walter von Saint Paul-Illaire, who collected plants in 1891 and sent them to his father in Germany, and after the father[9].



ORIGIN

Kenya, Tanzania

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

POWO now lists it as *Streptocarpus ionanthus*[7], but the old name is still widely used[1]. Where forest is cleared, the habitats of wild African violets dry out and their populations die[10].

Caution

The ASPCA lists it as non-toxic for cats and dogs[3]. The Bonn poison centre rates it as non-toxic for people too; larger amounts can still cause stomach upset and nausea[11].

Care

Light. Lots of bright light, but no direct sun, especially in summer – it scorches the leaves; too little light reduces or halts flowering. From spring to autumn a north- or east-facing window (south- or east-facing in the southern hemisphere), in winter a south- or west-facing one (north- or west-facing in the southern hemisphere)[1].

Water. Room-temperature water once the surface is dry, onto the compost or from below for half an hour. Wetting the plant can lead to mould or rot[1]; cold water on the leaves can cause white blotches[2]. As a rule of thumb, about once a week.

Temperature & humidity. 18–24 °C by day and 16 °C at night, all year, without cold draughts or sudden changes[1]. After nights below about 16 °C it is stunted and can take long to recover[8]. It dislikes dry air: stand it on damp gravel, but don't mist – that marks the leaves[1].

Soil, pot & repotting. Light, free-draining, peat-free houseplant or African violet compost. Every two to three years in spring, slightly larger: too large or deep a pot can deter flowering. Usually about 10 cm is the maximum[1].

Feeding. For more flowers, you can give a dilute liquid feed every three to four weeks in spring and summer[1]. Yellowing lower leaves and slower growth usually mean it needs fertiliser[2].

Propagating

In spring, insert the stalk of an almost full-sized leaf so the leaf just touches the compost. Cover with a plastic bag; bright, no direct sun, 18 °C – new plants should form at its base in four to five weeks[1].

Extras

Cultivars range from micro-miniatures 3–6 cm across to large standards over 75 cm[12].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Few or no flowers. → Water as soon as the surface is dry, with water at room temperature.	Crown and roots rot. → Let the surface dry before watering, and never leave it standing in damp soil.
Light	Thin, dark green leaves on long stalks; few or no flowers. → Move it somewhere brighter, but out of direct sun. In winter, a sunnier window.	Scorched leaves. → Move it out of direct sun or behind a thin curtain.
Fertiliser	Older, lower leaves turn yellow; it grows more slowly. → Feed every 3–4 weeks in spring and summer.	
Warmth	Stunted after nights below about 16 °C; recovery can take long. → Keep it at 16 °C or more at night, away from cold draughts.	



Photo: Kor!An (Корзун Андрей), CC BY-SA 3.0

Boston fern

The Waterfall *Nephrolepis exaltata* · also Sword fern, Nephrolepis

Bright green fronds that arch over the rim of the pot like a fountain – most beautiful in a hanging basket. It wants light and humidity, but it's non-toxic and grows fast.

What it does for you

The Boston fern is a classic: this variety of the sword fern, 'Bostoniensis', has long been a popular houseplant[1]. Its fronds grow up to 90 centimetres long, arch and hang over on all sides[2] – perfect for hanging baskets, pedestals and plant stands[3]. On top of that, it's non-toxic for people, cats and dogs[4,5].

MYTH

"The Boston fern is an air purifier."

FACT

In a trial in airtight chambers of one cubic metre, ferns did indeed remove the most formaldehyde per leaf area[6]. In real homes, though, normal ventilation exchanges the air much faster than potted plants could filter out pollutants – for a noticeable effect you'd need, depending on the study, ten to a thousand plants per square metre[7].

FACT SHEET

CARE	moderate
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	plenty
HUMIDITY	high
SHOOT LENGTH	up to approx. 90 cm long, 90 cm wide · trailing
GROWTH	fast
TEMPERATURE	ideal 16–24 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: non-toxic Cats: non-toxic Dogs: non-toxic
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	10.5 → 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

The sword fern grows wild in tropical and subtropical America – from Florida, Texas and the Caribbean islands through Central America to Bolivia and Brazil, and also on Hawaii[8]. There it grows up to two metres tall[3].



ORIGIN

United States, Mexico, Bahamas, Bermuda, Turks and Caicos Islands, Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Montserrat, Virgin Islands, British, Virgin Islands, U.S., Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

The Boston fern is a natural mutant with arching fronds. It was noticed in the mid-1890s in Boston, in a shipment of ferns from Philadelphia[3,9] – hence the name.

Caution

The sword fern is not toxic for cats and dogs[4], and no poisonings in humans are known either[5]. It's still not a snack.

Care

Light. Bright, but without direct sun – e.g. at a window with morning sun or behind a net curtain[3]. A spot close to a shady window works too; it never belongs right at a window with midday or afternoon sun[2].

Water. Always keep the soil slightly moist, but not wet[2]. Ideally use soft water, and water a little more sparingly in winter[10]. If it dries out, it drops fronds[1]. Still, of all the common ferns it forgives dryness best[3].

Temperature & humidity. About 20 °C during the day, a few degrees cooler at night is welcome, but not below 10 °C[2]. It needs high humidity – otherwise the tips turn brown[3]. A tray of wet gravel helps, as does a spot in the bathroom or kitchen[1].

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free multipurpose compost[10], porous and quick to drain[2]. Repot every few years in spring[3].

Feeding. From spring to early autumn once a month at half strength[2]. Too much fertiliser turns the frond tips brown[3].

Propagating

Ferns don't flower or make seeds; they make spores instead[3]. When repotting in spring you can divide it[3]. Rooted runners can be separated too[10]. Plants grown from spores usually don't look like the variety[3].

Extras

The sword fern often produces new forms. That's how many varieties came about, such as 'Fluffy Ruffles' with upright, ruffled fronds or the small 'Dallas', which gets by with less light and humidity[3]. By the way, the name *Nephrolepis* means "kidney scale"[1].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Fronds drop, the plant turns grayish and grows slowly. → Water until the soil is evenly moist again, pour off the excess. Cut dried-up fronds off near the soil – new ones grow back.	Fronds and roots rot, the soil stays wet. → Water less until the soil is just moist, not wet. Cut off rotten fronds, water more sparingly in winter.
Light	Fronds grow long, weak and drooping, and there are fewer of them. → Move it somewhere brighter, e.g. to a shady window or one with morning sun.	Fronds turn pale or light green, and scorch in direct sun. → Move it out of direct sun, cut scorched fronds off near the soil.
Fertiliser		Fronds turn brown and dry from the tips. → Flush the soil thoroughly, afterwards feed only at half strength.
Warmth	Fronds are damaged by cold nights at the window or on the balcony – it is frost-tender. → Move it somewhere warmer, not below 10 °C. Cut damaged fronds off near the soil.	



Photo: Sciencia58, CC0

Anthurium

The Everbloomer — *Anthurium andraeanum* · also Flamingo flower, Laceleaf

Glossy red hearts above dark foliage, almost all year round: the anthurium likes it warm and humid, and in return brings colour into the room when everything outside is grey.

What it does for you

The anthurium flowers all year round, and each flower head (inflorescence) lasts several weeks[1]. In a commercial growing guide, several cultivars kept flowering for over a year and a half under indoor light[2]. On top of that come dark green leaves with an arrow-shaped base[3] – a lovely sight even without flowers.

MYTH

"The red heart is the flower."

FACT

The glossy heart is a bract, a modified leaf. The real flowers are tiny and sit tightly packed on the spike in the middle – each with a pistil and stamens[4].

FACT SHEET

CARE	moderate
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	high
HEIGHT	up to approx. 50 cm tall, 30 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	slow
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–30 °C · not below 13 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: mildly toxic Cats: mildly toxic Dogs: mildly toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free) orchid substrate
FEEDING	every 2 weeks, spring to mid-autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 → 17 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

Anthurium andraeanum grows wild in Colombia and Ecuador[5] – as a vine-like epiphyte in humid forests at 400 to 1200 metres[4]. It was discovered in 1876 in south-western Colombia; the French botanist Édouard André sent it to Jean Linden's nursery in Belgium[4].



ORIGIN

Colombia, Ecuador

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

The anthuriums in shops are mostly interspecific hybrids of *A. andraeanum* with related species – that's the group this page is about. Leading producers include the Netherlands, Hawaii, Mauritius and Jamaica, both of pot plants and of cut flowers[4].

Caution

All parts contain calcium oxalate crystals. Chewing on them causes pain and swelling of the mouth, lips and tongue, heavy drooling and difficulty swallowing[6]. Cats and dogs show the same symptoms and vomit, according to the ASPCA's entry for the related *Anthurium scherzeranum*[7]. The sap irritates skin and eyes – wear gloves when cutting[3].

Care

Light. Bright without direct sun, e.g. at a window with morning or evening sun or behind a net curtain at a sunny window; harsh sun scorches the leaves[1]. If it's too dark, it makes lots of leaves but hardly any flowers[2].

Water. Water when the soil is almost dry five centimetres down – ideally with rainwater or filtered water at room temperature. Too much water makes the roots rot[1]. Water more sparingly in winter[3]. As a rule of thumb, that means about once a week in summer.

Temperature & humidity. 18–30 °C all year, away from radiators and cold draughts[1]. Below 13 °C it gets damaged[2]. If the air is too dry, the leaves turn brown – a tray of damp gravel or neighbouring plants help[1].

Soil, pot & repotting. Acidic and free-draining: two parts peat-free ericaceous compost, one part each of perlite and orchid bark. Repot every two to three years into a pot only slightly bigger[1].

Feeding. From spring to mid-autumn regularly with orchid fertiliser[1], about every two weeks[3]. Too much fertiliser turns the lower leaves yellow with brown tips[2].

Propagating

Plants with several shoots can be divided. Or cut off a piece of stem with aerial roots and root it in a glass of water[1].

Extras

Over 600 cultivars are available today, with bracts in red, pink, orange, coral, white, green, purple or brown, some two-coloured[4]. Simply cut spent flower stalks and old leaves off at the base[1].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaf tips burn brown, the roots get damaged, growth slows. → Water thoroughly and more often. Check the soil more often from now on.	Older leaves turn yellow, the soil stays wet, the roots rot. → Water less often, empty the cachepot, remove yellow leaves. If the roots are damaged, repot in fresh, well-draining soil.
Light	Lots of new leaves, but few or no flowers. → Move it somewhere brighter, e.g. to a window with morning or evening sun – but out of harsh sun.	Leaves bleach in the middle, the tips turn brown. → Move it out of direct sun or draw a net curtain.
Fertiliser	Flowers only sparsely despite a bright spot. → From spring to mid-autumn add orchid fertiliser to the water every two weeks.	Lower leaves turn yellow with brown tips, salts build up in the soil. → Flush the soil thoroughly, then feed less.
Warmth	Stops growing, after cold nights the leaves get damaged. → Move it somewhere warmer, above 18 °C, away from the cold window and out of draughts.	



Areca palm

The Feather-Light Palm · *Chrysalidocarpus lutescens* · also Butterfly palm, Golden cane palm, Dypsis, Chrysalidocarpus

Yellowish stems, feathery fronds, a touch of the South Seas: the areca palm brings holiday vibes into the room. In return it wants light and humid air.

What it does for you

With its feathery, arching fronds and yellowish stalks, the areca palm brings the tropics into your room – it's one of the most popular indoor palms[1]. The ASPCA lists it as non-toxic for cats and dogs[2], but NC State rates it as low in toxicity[1] – more on that under Caution.

MYTH

"According to NASA, the areca palm is the best air purifier."

FACT

It wasn't even in the famous NASA study from 1989: the "bamboo palm" tested there is a different species, *Chamaedorea seifrizii*[3]. Besides, the tests were done in small, airtight chambers. In real homes, normal ventilation alone exchanges the air much faster than potted plants could filter out pollutants. For a noticeable effect you'd need, depending on the study, ten to a thousand plants per square metre[4].

FACT SHEET

CARE	moderate
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	plenty
HUMIDITY	high
HEIGHT	up to approx. 2 m tall, est. 1 m wide · bushy
GROWTH	medium

TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–29 °C · not below 13 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: mildly toxic Cats: mildly toxic Dogs: mildly toxic
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free) standard potting compost
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 cm → 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

The areca palm only grows wild in eastern Madagascar[5] – in dense clumps in forests, on sand dunes and along streams[6]. There its habitat is shrinking[7]. In many tropical countries, on the other hand, it has become naturalised[5].



ORIGIN

Madagascar

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

It was described in 1878 as *Chrysalidocarpus lutescens*, later called *Dypsis lutescens* – which is still often what the label says[5]. DNA analyses split the genus *Dypsis* up again in 2022; since then the old name applies once more[8]. *Lutescens* means "becoming yellowish" and suits the yellow leaf stalks[7]. The fruits are yellow to orange too[1].

Caution

The ASPCA lists the areca palm as non-toxic for cats, dogs and horses[2]. NC State, however, rates its leaves and stems as low in toxicity (nausea, vomiting) and the palm heart – the growing tip with the young leaves – as cyanogenic (cyanide-releasing). Skin irritation isn't known[1]. The sources differ, so don't let pets or children chew on it.

Care

Light. It needs plenty of light[6], but no harsh sun: bright and indirect, close to an east, west or south window[9]. In winter it can move closer to a south or west window[6] (in the southern hemisphere, north instead of south).

Water. In summer the soil should never dry out, but the palm should never stand in water either; in winter let the surface dry out slightly[6]. Water thoroughly as soon as the surface is dry, and empty the saucer[9] – as a rule of thumb once or twice a week in summer. Waterlogging makes the roots rot[9].

Temperature & humidity. Ideal is 18–21 °C at night and 24–29 °C by day[9], in winter never below 13 °C[6]. It likes high humidity[1]; in heated rooms a tray of damp gravel helps[6]. It is very prone to spider mites[9].

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free houseplant soil or loam-based multipurpose compost[6], open and rich in organic matter[9]. Repot every two to three years in spring, once the roots fill the pot – carefully, the roots are sensitive[9]. The RHS advises repotting every two years until it's in a 20–30 cm pot; in the years you don't repot, renew the top 5 cm of soil[6].

Feeding. It is more sensitive to salt than most foliage plants – too much fertiliser makes the frond tips die back[10]. Recommendations range from every two weeks[6] to two or three times a year[9]; as a rule of thumb, monthly and at low strength from spring to early autumn.

Propagating

A lush pot is often a whole group: nurseries sow up to 100 seeds in one 20-centimetre pot[10]. Large plants can be divided[1].

Extras

Indoors it grows about 1.8–2.1 metres tall and adds 15–25 centimetres a year. You can't shorten it, because every shoot only grows from its tip[9]. Cut old fronds off instead of tearing them[6]. Outdoors it grows up to eight metres tall and flowers yellow in summer[11] – indoors rarely[1].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Brown, dry leaf tips, fronds turn yellow. → Water thoroughly until water runs out at the bottom, pour off the excess. From now on, check as soon as the surface is dry.	Fronds turn brown, the roots rot. → Water less often, empty the cachepot. If it's rotting, repot in fresh, porous soil.
Light		Fronds turn yellowish or get scorched. → Move it out of the harsh midday sun or draw a net curtain.
Fertiliser	New fronds stay small and turn pale yellow, often between green veins. → From spring to early autumn feed monthly at low strength, with trace elements such as iron.	Frond tips die back brown. → Flush the soil thoroughly, then feed less.
Warmth	Reddish-brown, dead patches on the fronds – often after a draught or a cold spell. → Move it somewhere warmer, never below 13 °C, away from draughts. Cut off damaged fronds.	



Fiddle-leaf fig

The Homebody *Ficus lyrata* · also Banjo fig, Ficus

Huge, fiddle-shaped leaves on a slender trunk: the fiddle-leaf fig is the trendy tree for the living room. Once it's in the right spot, it would rather stay there.

What it does for you

The fiddle-leaf fig has glossy, fiddle-shaped leaves up to 45 cm long[1]. Because it grows upright, it needs little floor space even as a stately tree[2]. Indoors it grows about 0.6 to 3 metres tall[3].

MYTH

"The fiddle-leaf fig drops its leaves on a whim."

FACT

Sudden leaf drop has solid reasons: usually too much water, otherwise cold in winter, too little light, too much fertiliser or cold draughts[2]. Figs are sensitive to big changes in light, such as from a bright greenhouse into a room. So some professional growers get them used to less light for at least two months. If it drops green leaves, a brighter spot often helps[4].

FACT SHEET

CARE	moderate
LIGHT	bright with some sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	medium
HEIGHT	up to approx. 3 m tall, est. 90 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	medium
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–27 °C · not below 16 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: mildly toxic Cats: mildly toxic Dogs: mildly toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free) standard potting compost
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to late summer
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 → 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild, the fiddle-leaf fig grows in tropical West and Central Africa[3], from Guinea-Bissau to Gabon[5]. There it's a tree of 18 to 30 metres[3] that grows as a hemiepiphyte[5].



ORIGIN

Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Gabon

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

It was only described scientifically in 1894[5]. Its leaves resemble the body of a fiddle[4] – it's also known as the banjo fig[1].

Caution

All parts contain calcium oxalate. Chewing on it irritates the mouth, causes drooling and possibly vomiting; its toxicity is considered low[3]. For cats and dogs, the ASPCA lists irritation of the stomach, gut and skin for figs[6]. The sticky white sap can irritate the skin and make allergies worse – wear gloves when cutting[2].

Care

Light. Very bright, ideally with morning sun[7], but no harsh afternoon sun – or the leaves scorch[3]. If it's too dark, it grows long and thin, and the leaves turn dull or yellow[7].

Water. Water when the top five centimetres are dry, and never leave it standing in water[7]. As a rule of thumb about once a week in summer. In winter keep the soil just slightly moist[2].

Temperature & humidity. Evenly warm without big swings or draughts[2], ideally 18–27 °C; below about 16 °C (60 °F) it risks chilling injury[4]. Medium humidity[3]; in dry air the leaf edges turn brown – keep it away from the radiator[7], a tray of damp gravel helps[2].

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free, loam-based compost with fine bark, or peat-free multi-purpose compost[2]. Every couple of years in spring into a slightly bigger pot; for large plants just replace the top 2.5 cm of soil[2].

Feeding. From spring to late summer with a high-nitrogen fertiliser[2]. More isn't better: half strength is safer[7] – as a rule of thumb about monthly.

Propagating

Cut off shoot tips about 15 cm long and root them in water – or use air layering[7]. Blot the milky sap that oozes out straight away so it doesn't drip on the floor[7].

Extras

The large leaves collect dust – wipe them now and then with a damp cloth[7]. Flowers and the round figs, green with pale dots and red when ripe, rarely form indoors[3].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaves turn yellow or dry up and drop. → Water thoroughly, then check the top few centimetres regularly.	Sudden leaf drop, yellow leaves or dark spots, rotting roots. → Water less often, empty the cachepot, let the soil dry out before watering again.
Light	Long, thin shoots, dull or yellow leaves, green leaves drop. → Move it somewhere brighter, ideally with morning sun – and then leave it there.	Brown, scorched patches on the leaves. → Protect it from afternoon sun; bright, but not in blazing sun.
Fertiliser		Brown, scorched leaf edges, leaves drop. → Don't feed for a while, then only at half strength.
Warmth	Brown spots, leaves drop – often in winter or in a draught. → Move it somewhere warmer and draught-free, not below 16 °C.	



Photo: Rebecca gagne, CC BY-SA 4.0

Poinsettia

The Seasonal Star *Euphorbia pulcherrima*

Bright red at Christmas time – and far more harmless than its reputation. It likes it bright, evenly warm and free of draughts. With patience and long nights, it even colours up a second time.

What it does for you

The poinsettia brings strong colour into winter – red, pink or white[1]. The bright part isn't flowers, though, but bracts; the real flowers are the small yellow cyathia in the middle[2,3]. It doesn't have to be thrown away: with care and long nights, it colours up again the next winter[2].

MYTH

"The poinsettia is highly toxic."

FACT

Not true. In a US review of 22,793 cases, mostly involving children, nobody died and 92 % developed no toxic effects at all[4]. The Bonn poison information centre rates it as mildly toxic[5], and the ASPCA calls its toxicity to animals "over-rated", though it still lists it as toxic for cats and dogs[6]. You still shouldn't eat it.

FACT SHEET

CARE	moderate
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	low
HEIGHT	up to approx. 60 cm tall, 50 cm wide · bushy
GROWTH	fast
TEMPERATURE	ideal 16–21 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: mildly toxic Cats: mildly toxic Dogs: mildly toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 3 weeks, early spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 1–2 years
POT	est. 9 → 19 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild it grows from Mexico to Guatemala in seasonally dry tropical forests – as a shrub several metres tall[7,2].



ORIGIN

Mexico, Guatemala

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

The Aztecs called it *Cuetlaxochitl*[8]. In Mexico it later became the "Flor de Nochebuena", the flower of the Holy Night[9]. In 1828 the US envoy Joel R. Poinsett brought it to the USA[2] – hence the name poinsettia.

Caution

The white milky sap can irritate skin and mucous membranes and trigger allergies[1,5]. NC State warns of mild to severe contact dermatitis and, if it gets into the eye, lasting damage to the cornea[1]. The Bonn poison centre notes that the strongly irritant diterpenes were found only in the wild form and could not be detected in cultivated varieties[5]. As the sources differ, treat the sap as an irritant: wear gloves and keep it out of your eyes. Eaten leaves cause stomach ache, nausea and vomiting, very rarely drowsiness and dizziness[5,2]. In cats and dogs it irritates the mouth and stomach, and they sometimes vomit[6]; isolated severe cases have been described[5].

Care

Light. Bright, but without harsh sun[10,3]; in winter it tolerates full light[11].

Water. Water as soon as the surface is dry – neither let it dry out nor keep it wet[10]. Open the wrapping at the bottom so water can drain[3].

Temperature & humidity. An even 16–21 °C, away from radiators and draughts, not by a cold window at night[10]. Below 10 °C it drops leaves[2]; while it's coloured, keep it at 13 °C or more[11]. Don't buy one from a cold display outside the shop[10].

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free, loam-based soil with some bark[11]. Cut it back to about 20 cm in early or mid-spring, and move it into a pot 5–10 cm (2–4 in) bigger in early summer[2].

Feeding. Don't feed while it's coloured[3]; after that, every two to three weeks from spring to early autumn[2].

Propagating

In early summer, take shoot tips as cuttings and root them with rooting hormone[11]. Wear gloves, as the milky sap runs out[1].

Extras

How to get it to colour up again: it's a short-day plant. From mid-autumn, keep it completely dark for 14 hours every night for eight to ten weeks – under a cardboard box, say – and bright during the day[2,3]. Even lamplight in the evening prevents the colouring[3].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaves wilt and drop. → Water thoroughly as soon as the surface is dry, and never let the soil dry out completely.	Leaves drop, the roots and stems rot. → Only water again once the surface is dry; don't leave water standing in the wrapping or cachepot.
Light	Leaves yellow and drop, the shoots grow long and thin. → Move it to a bright spot by the window, but out of direct sun.	In autumn the bracts stay green because lamplight in the evening disrupts the long nights. → From mid-autumn, keep it completely dark for 14 hours every night for eight to ten weeks.
Fertiliser	Weak growth in the growing season. → From early spring to early autumn, feed with liquid fertiliser every two to three weeks.	
Warmth	Sudden leaf drop, often right after buying or after a draught at the window. → Keep it at an even 16–21 °C, away from draughts and not by a cold window at night.	Leaves and bracts drop when it stands by or above a radiator. → Move it to an evenly warm, bright spot at a distance from the radiator.



Wax plant

The Night-Scented Climber *Hoya carnosa* · also Porcelain flower, Honey plant

Thick, glossy leaves on twining stems and domed clusters of waxy, star-shaped flowers that smell sweetest at night. It can flower again and again from the same spurs – if you leave them on.

What it does for you

Its small, star-shaped flowers are shiny and waxy, held in domed clusters, and highly fragrant, especially at night[1]. The thick, semi-succulent leaves can store water[1]. MBG calls it a long-lived houseplant[2]. It doesn't measurably clean the air: depending on the study, you'd need ten to a thousand plants per square metre[3].

MYTH

"Cut off the old flower stalks once it has finished flowering."

FACT

Better not: more blooms will often sprout from the stumps of previous clusters[1]. The spur can flower again and again over several years – cutting it off cuts off future flowers[4]. And be patient: most plants don't flower until they are two or three years old[4].

FACT SHEET

CARE	moderate
LIGHT	bright with some sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	high
HEIGHT	up to approx. 1.2 m tall, 60 cm wide · climbing
GROWTH	fast

TEMPERATURE	ideal 16–24 °C · not below 10 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: mildly toxic Cats: mildly toxic Dogs: mildly toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	orchid substrate cactus and succulent soil
FEEDING	every 2 weeks, early spring to late summer
REPOTTING	every 3–4 years
POT	est. 9 → 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild it grows from southern China to Laos and from southern Japan to Taiwan, as a climbing epiphyte or on rocks, mainly in the subtropics[5]. It was first published in 1782 as *Asclepias carnosa*, and as *Hoya carnosa* in 1810[5].



ORIGIN

China, Japan, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Taiwan

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

The genus honours Thomas Hoy, gardener to the Duke of Northumberland in the late 18th century[2]. *Carnosa* means fleshy, after the thick leaves[4].

Caution

Sources differ. The ASPCA lists it, under the cultivar 'Krinkle Kurl', as non-toxic for cats and dogs[6], and a University of Nebraska Extension list calls hoyas non-toxic[7]. The University of Zurich's veterinary toxicology database rates the whole plant as very highly toxic in exceptional cases[8]. The main compounds in hoyas are pregnanes and pregnane glycosides, some of which presumably act like heart glycosides. The database rates hoyas as very highly toxic for birds and calls them a dangerous plant for pet birds; in dogs and cats only stomach and gut symptoms have been seen so far[9]. We found no rating by a poison centre for people. The RHS calls the milky sap toxic and advises gloves, as it can irritate the skin[1].

Care

The RHS guide covers hoyas in general; its winter minimum is for this species.

Light. A bright spot, but out of hot summer sun, which can scorch the leaves[1]. MBG advises at least half a day of direct sun, NC State bright indirect light[2,4]. Good light is needed for flowers; once buds appear, don't move or turn the pot[2].

Water. From spring to autumn water regularly; keep the compost moist but not waterlogged, or the roots may rot. From mid-autumn to late winter wait until it is fairly dry, but never let it dry out completely[1]. NC State says to let the soil dry between waterings and to use water at room temperature[4]. As a rule of thumb, about once a week in summer.

Temperature & humidity. 16–24 °C in spring and summer, away from radiators and cold draughts; cooler in winter, at least 10 °C at night. It dislikes dry air while growing: stand it on a saucer of damp gravel[1]. Spider mites can appear when the air is too dry[4].

Soil, pot & repotting. A sharply draining mix, such as equal parts orchid bark, peat-free multi-purpose compost and coarse perlite. It can stay in its pot for several years, until the roots fill it; repot in spring into a pot only a few centimetres larger[1]. It doesn't mind being pot-bound – just don't repot it while it is in bud or flower[4].

Feeding. Lightly: every couple of weeks in spring and summer, ideally with an orchid feed, once a month in autumn and winter. Flush the pot with plain water every few months to prevent a build-up of salts[1].

Propagating

In spring or early summer, take cuttings from the previous year's stems and stand them in a glass of water – they should root in two or three weeks. The RHS advises gloves, as the milky sap is a skin irritant[1].

Extras

The flowers are white to pink and hairy, in clusters of up to 30[4], and they make sticky nectar[8]. Cultivars include 'Krimson Queen' or 'Tricolor', with creamy white to pink margins, and 'Compacta' or 'Krinkle Kurl', with folded, rope-like leaves[4].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaves or flower buds drop. → Water regularly from spring to autumn; in winter never let the compost dry out completely.	Leaves drop or turn black, dieback; the roots rot. → Always let the water drain away and water less. With root rot it rarely recovers – take cuttings straight away.
Light	It doesn't flower. → Move it somewhere brighter with some sun, but out of hot summer sun.	Scorched leaves. → Move it out of hot summer sun.
Fertiliser		Stems wilt and die back. → Flush the pot with plain water and feed only lightly.
Warmth	Leaves drop or turn black, dieback. → In winter keep it at 10 °C or more at night, away from cold draughts.	



Photo: Tangopaso, Public domain

Weeping fig

The Reluctant Mover *Ficus benjamina* · also Benjamin fig, Ficus

Small, glossy leaves on drooping branches: the weeping fig is a classic among indoor trees. Once it has found its spot, you'd best leave it exactly there.

What it does for you

The weeping fig is an evergreen tree with drooping branches and glossy, pointed leaves up to 12 cm long[1]. Indoors it reaches about 0.6 to 3 metres; its flexible little trunks are often grown braided[2].

MYTH

"The weeping fig improves the air in your home."

FACT

In real homes, potted plants don't filter out pollutants measurably – for that you'd need, depending on the study, ten to a thousand plants per square metre[3]. For people with allergies the weeping fig can even make the air worse: allergens from its milky sap bind to the dust on the leaves and are released when touched[4].

FACT SHEET

CARE	moderate
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	moderate
HUMIDITY	medium
HEIGHT	up to approx. 3 m tall, 1.5 m wide · upright
GROWTH	slow
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–27 °C · not below 15 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: toxic Cats: toxic Dogs: toxic Sap irritates the skin
SOIL	standard potting compost houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to late summer
REPOTTING	every 2–3 years
POT	est. 9 → 30 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

In the wild, the weeping fig grows in tropical and subtropical Asia, from India and southern China via South-East Asia to New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and northern Australia[5]. There it grows 12 to 15 metres tall[2].



ORIGIN

India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Australia

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

Carl Linnaeus described it in 1767[5]. Other names are Java fig or waringin[1].

Caution

For cats and dogs, the ASPCA lists irritation of the stomach, gut and skin[6]; for people, too, it is considered harmful if swallowed[1]. The sticky white milky sap can irritate the skin and aggravate allergies – wear gloves when cutting[7]. The weeping fig is a fairly common indoor allergen and can cause a constantly runny nose, conjunctivitis and asthma. If you have allergies or a latex allergy, you shouldn't keep one[8].

Care

Light. Bright without direct sun; it tolerates a few hours of morning or evening sun[7], and survives shade if it must[2]. Above all: leave it in its spot. Weeping figs are particularly quick to drop leaves when moved[7] – they react sensitively to changes in light and then grow new, adapted leaves[2].

Water. Water regularly with room-temperature water and let the soil dry slightly in between, in winter keep it just slightly moist[7]. Water just often enough that the soil never dries out completely[2]. As a rule of thumb about once a week in summer.

Temperature & humidity. Evenly warm without fluctuations[7], ideally 18–27 °C; below 15 °C it risks cold damage[9]. Keep it away from draughts[2]. It likes medium to high humidity: mist the leaves and stand the pot on a tray of damp gravel[7].

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free, loam-based compost with fine bark or peat-free multipurpose compost[7]. Every couple of years in spring into a slightly bigger pot (as a rule of thumb every 2–3 years); for large plants just renew the top 2.5 cm of soil[7].

Feeding. From spring to late summer with a high-nitrogen fertiliser[7] – as a rule of thumb about monthly.

Propagating

Take semi-ripe cuttings in spring or summer and root them in a heated propagator[7].

Extras

It comes with green or variegated leaves[7] and in many varieties such as 'Starlight' or 'Natasja'[9]. Don't prune braided trunks[7]. Its small figs ripen from green via orange-red to purple-black[2]. Watch out for spider mites, mealybugs and scale insects[7].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaves turn yellow, dry up and drop. → Water thoroughly, then check the top few centimetres regularly.	Sudden leaf drop, yellow leaves, the soil stays wet. → Water less often, empty the cachepot and let the soil dry slightly before the next watering.
Light	Lots of green leaves drop. → Move it somewhere brighter, but only once – then leave it there until it has settled in.	Dry, shrivelled leaves. → Protect it from harsh midday sun; bright, but not in full sun.
Fertiliser		Leaves drop, the oldest first. → Don't feed for a few months, then less often and at a lower dose.
Warmth	Leaves drop – often in winter, at a cold window or in a draught. → Move it somewhere warmer and draught-free, not below 15 °C.	



Calathea

The Diva *Goeppertia makoyana* · also Peacock plant

Leaves like peacock feathers that fold up in the evening: the calathea is a real eye-catcher – and the first diva in this guide. Dry air gives it brown tips.

What it does for you

Its leaves look like peacock feathers: creamy white to light green with dark green blotches, the undersides reddish purple[1]. In the evening it folds its leaves upwards, at sunrise it opens them again[1]. This sleep movement is called nyctinasty[2]. And it's non-toxic for cats and dogs[3].

MYTH

"Brown leaf tips? Then it needs more water."

FACT

In calatheas, brown tips usually come from air that's too dry[4,2]. Fluoride in tap water[1] and too much fertiliser also make leaf edges die back[5]. If you then water more, you risk wet soil and rotten roots[4]. Thirst tends to show as limp, curled or yellow leaves[2,5].

FACT SHEET

CARE	demanding
LIGHT	bright, no midday sun
WATER	plenty
HUMIDITY	high
HEIGHT	up to approx. 60 cm tall, 30 cm wide · upright
GROWTH	medium
TEMPERATURE	ideal 18–21 °C · not below 16 °C
TOXICITY	Humans: non-toxic Cats: non-toxic Dogs: non-toxic
SOIL	houseplant soil (peat-free)
FEEDING	every 4 weeks, spring to early autumn
REPOTTING	every 1–3 years
POT	est. 9 → 19 cm

What the symbols mean: page 4 →

Origin & history

Species from three genera are sold under the name "calathea"[4]. Which of them is the most common in shops isn't documented by any source we found. The RHS names the peacock plant, *Goeppertia makoyana*, as an example of a calathea with patterned leaves[4]; in the USA it was one of only three commonly grown species in 1975[5]. That's the one this page is about. It grows wild in south-eastern Brazil, in Espírito Santo[6], in warm, shady rainforest[1].



ORIGIN

Brazil

Natural range (simplified). Source: Plants of the World Online (Kew).

It was described in 1872 as *Calathea makoyana*[6], named after a nursery in Liège[1]. Since 2012 it has belonged to the genus *Goeppertia*[7]. In the trade it is often still called calathea[2].

Caution

Good news: the calathea is non-toxic for cats and dogs[3,1], and it's considered non-toxic for humans too[8]. Still, plants generally belong out of reach of small children[8].

Care

Light. Bright, but out of direct sunlight. In summer a shady window or one with morning sun is ideal, in winter it can go to a sunny window[4]. If it's too dark, the pattern fades[1].

Water. In spring and summer keep it evenly moist[4]; water when the surface has dried slightly[5]. In winter the surface may dry out, but never the whole soil[4]. Ideally use rainwater, because fluoride in tap water can turn the leaves brown[1]. The RHS considers tap water that has stood for a while to be fine[4].

Temperature & humidity. 16–21 °C[4] – NC State gives 18–24 °C[1] – with no draughts or sudden temperature changes[4,1]. When it comes to humidity, it's a real diva: it needs about 60 percent[1] – in heated rooms it's often only 10 to 30[9]. A bright bathroom, a gravel tray or neighbouring plants help[4], more on this in the basics.

Soil, pot & repotting. Peat-free houseplant soil or multipurpose compost with about ten percent grit. Repot in spring, once the clump fills the pot, and only one or two sizes bigger[4] – depending on the source, every year to every few years[4,2].

Feeding. From spring to early autumn once a month with liquid fertiliser, none in winter[4]. Too much fertiliser makes leaf tips die back[5].

Propagating

Divide the clump in spring: cut the root ball into pieces, each with several leaves, and pot them up singly[4]. Divided every two years, it grows more vigorously[1].

Extras

Indoors it rarely flowers; the flowers are small, white and purple[1]. Dust on the thin leaves slows down photosynthesis – wipe them now and then with a damp, soft cloth[1]. A relative, *Calathea allouia*, forms small tubers that are eaten like potatoes in the West Indies and northern South America[5].

Symptoms & help

	TOO LITTLE	TOO MUCH
Water	Leaves hang limp, curl up or turn yellow. → Water thoroughly and then keep the soil evenly moist – never let it dry out completely, even in winter.	Yellow leaves, water-soaked patches on the leaves, rotting roots or stems. → Water less often, empty the cachepot, let the surface dry out in winter; check the roots.
Light	Hardly grows, the leaf pattern fades. → Move it somewhere brighter, e.g. to a shady window or one with morning sun, in winter also to a sunny one.	Leaves turn yellowish or scorched. → Move it out of direct sun, somewhere bright and shaded.
Fertiliser	Leaves turn yellowish. → From spring to early autumn feed once a month with liquid fertiliser.	Leaf tips and edges turn brown and die back. → Feed less often or at a weaker dose.
Warmth	Leaves droop or curl – often after cold or draughts. → Move it somewhere warmer and draught-free, not below 16 °C, avoid sudden temperature changes.	

All plants at a glance

PLANT	Care	Light	Water	Humidity	Height	Growth	min.	Soil	Cats / Dogs
Cast-iron plant *Aspidistra elatior*					up to approx. 60 cm		10 °C		
Ponytail palm *Beaucarnea recurvata*					up to approx. 1.5 m		10 °C		
Spider plant *Chlorophytum comosum*					up to approx. 45 cm		10 °C		
Jade plant *Crassula ovata*					up to approx. 1 m		5 °C		
Pothos *Epipremnum aureum*					up to approx. 2.4 m		16 °C		
Snake plant *Dracaena trifasciata*					up to approx. 1 m		10 °C		
ZZ plant *Zamioculcas zamiifolia*					up to approx. 1 m		16 °C		
Chinese money plant *Pilea peperomioides*					up to approx. 30 cm		10 °C		
Christmas cactus *Schlumbergera truncata*					up to approx. 45 cm		10 °C		
Moth orchid *Phalaenopsis*					up to approx. 60 cm		13 °C		
Pincushion cactus *Mammillaria*					up to approx. 15 cm		5 °C		
Aloe vera *Aloe vera*					up to approx. 60 cm		10 °C		
Dracaena *Dracaena reflexa var. angustifolia*					up to approx. 2 m		10 °C		
Parlour palm *Chamaedorea elegans*					up to approx. 1.5 m		16 °C		
Heartleaf philodendron *Philodendron hederaceum*					up to approx. 1.2 m		15 °C		
Monstera *Monstera deliciosa*					up to approx. 2.4 m		10 °C		
Peace lily *Spathiphyllum wallisii*					up to approx. 90 cm		15 °C		
Rubber plant *Ficus elastica*					up to approx. 3 m		15 °C		
Spineless yucca *Yucca gigantea*					up to approx. 1.5 m		10 °C		
Amaryllis *Hippeastrum*					up to approx. 60 cm		7 °C		
Dieffenbachia *Dieffenbachia seguine*					up to approx. 1.5 m		15 °C		
African violet *Streptocarpus ionanthus*					up to approx. 23 cm		16 °C		
Boston fern *Nephrolepis exaltata*					up to approx. 90 cm		10 °C		
Anthurium *Anthurium andraeanum*					up to approx. 50 cm		13 °C		

PLANT	Care	Light	Water	Humidity	Height	Growth	min.	Soil	Cats / Dogs
Areca palm *Chrysalidocarpus lutescens*					up to approx. 2 m		13 °C		
Fiddle-leaf fig *Ficus lyrata*					up to approx. 3 m		16 °C		
Poinsettia *Euphorbia pulcherrima*					up to approx. 60 cm		10 °C		
Wax plant *Hoya carnosa*					up to approx. 1.2 m		10 °C		
Weeping fig *Ficus benjamina*					up to approx. 3 m		15 °C		
Calathea *Goeppertia makoyana*					up to approx. 60 cm		16 °C		

Glossary

Aerial root
A root that grows above ground from the stem. Climbing plants use them to hold on to trees or a moss pole, and some also take up water through them.

Air layering
Propagation on the mother plant: a shoot is cut slightly, wrapped in damp moss and plastic film, and only separated once roots have formed at the wound.

Alkaloids
Nitrogen-containing plant compounds that can have a strong effect on the body even in small amounts. Many plants use them to protect themselves from being eaten; examples are caffeine, nicotine and the lycorine of the amaryllis family.

Bract
A modified leaf at the flower cluster. In the peace lily and other arum family plants it is called a spathe: a showy, often coloured leaf that wraps around the spike of tiny flowers and looks like one large flower.

Bulblet
A small daughter bulb that grows at the side of a bulb's base. Once it has its own roots, it can be separated and potted up on its own.

Calcium oxalate
A salt of oxalic acid. Many plants, among them the arum family, store it in their cells as fine, needle-shaped crystals. When chewed, they prick the mouth and throat and irritate the mucous membranes.

CAM photosynthesis
A water-saving form of photosynthesis (crassulacean acid metabolism). The plant opens its stomata at night, stores the CO_2 it takes in as malic acid and processes it during the day with its pores closed. Typical of cacti and other succulents.

Caudex
A strongly thickened base of the stem or root in which a plant stores water. In the ponytail palm it is the bulbous stem base that looks a bit like an elephant's foot.

Cyathium
The flower cluster of the spurge family: a small green-yellow cup full of tiny flowers that looks like a single flower itself. In the poinsettia the cyathia sit in the middle of the coloured bracts – which are modified leaves, not petals.

Dioecious
Male and female flowers grow on separate plants. Fruits and seeds only form when a female plant is pollinated by a male one.

Dormancy
A break in which a plant grows little or not at all. Bulbs pull back their leaves and live on their reserves – many need this cool, dry phase to form new flowers.

Epiphyte
A plant that grows on trees instead of in the ground, without tapping into the tree. It gets water and nutrients from rain, air and decaying leaves in the forks of branches.

Finger test
Push your finger two to three centimetres into the soil: if it feels dry, you can water. Simpler and more reliable than any watering schedule.

Frond
The name for the leaves of ferns (and palms). In ferns they unroll like a bishop's crook as they emerge and are usually divided into many leaflets.

Hemiepiphyte
A plant that germinates high up on a tree as an epiphyte and only later reaches the ground with long roots – like many tropical figs. A true epiphyte, by contrast, never touches the ground in its whole life.

Nyctinasty
The “sleep movement” of leaves in a day-night rhythm: plants such as calatheas fold their leaves upwards in the evening and open them again in the morning – which is why their relatives are called "prayer plants".

Offset
A young daughter plant that sprouts from the mother plant (often from the rootstock) and can be separated and potted up on its own.

Rhizome
An underground stem, usually growing horizontally (“rootstock”), that stores water and nutrients and sends up new shoots.

Runner
A thin, often long side shoot that grows out of the plant and, where it touches the ground, forms roots and a new daughter plant.

Saponins
Bitter plant compounds that foam in water. In larger amounts they irritate the mucous membranes and the gut – typical in pets: drooling, vomiting, diarrhoea.

Short-day plant
A plant that only sets flowers once the nights get long enough – that is, in autumn. Even a lamp in the evening can interrupt the long night and prevent flowering.

Spores
Tiny reproductive cells of ferns, mosses and fungi. Ferns form them in small clusters (sori) on the underside of the fronds – instead of flowers and seeds.

Spur
The stalk (peduncle) a hoya's flower cluster sits on. It stays on the plant after flowering, and new flowers can form on it again – so don't cut it off.

Succulent
A plant that stores water in thick, fleshy leaves, stems or roots and so survives long dry spells. Examples: cacti, aloe, snake plant.

Tubercles
Small, cone-shaped bumps on the body of some cacti. The spines sit on their tips.

variegated
Patterned in several colours: leaves with white, yellow or cream edges or patches, because less leaf green (chlorophyll) forms there.

Waterlogging
Water that is left standing in the pot or cachepot. The roots no longer get oxygen and start to rot – the most common cause of death in houseplants.

Winter rest
A cool, dry break in winter during which many cacti and succulents hardly grow. The plant keeps its leaves but needs very little water and no fertiliser.

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What to do if a child or a pet has nibbled on a plant is in the basics under “Toxicity” (from page 6, where there's also room for your poison control centre's number). In case of unconsciousness or severe breathing difficulties, call your local emergency number right away; with pets, call the vet.