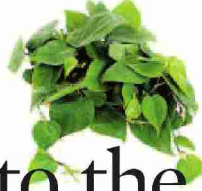


Philodendrons are among the easiest to grow indoors.



## Growing into the houseplant habit

Why are so many folks, outdoor gardeners among them, reluctant to garden inside?

**By William Hageman**  
TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS

How many houseplants does Larry Hodgson have?

About 600, he says. But that's just a guess. "My kid once tried to count them and gave up after 300," says Hodgson, author of "Houseplants for Dummies." "And that was only upstairs. I have lots and lots of plants downstairs and on another floor as well."

As Hodgson points out, the benefits of houseplants are manifold. Aside from the aesthetics — a little greenery will brighten even the most squalid dump — they provide a person with physical activity and mental stimulation. They even promote a healthy environment.

"Having houseplants in your home is like having your own little air filter," he says. "In this day and age, outdoor air is generally far less polluted than indoor air because we have so many things in our homes that give off toxic products. Houseplants can clean it up for you."

But even with all those positives, people — even people with gardening expertise — can be reluctant to embrace houseplants.

That's understandable, Hodgson says.

When you grow plants outdoors, nature does most of the work, providing the right light, humidity and rainfall. The plants mostly take care of themselves, and the gardener is just along for the ride.

"Indoors they depend on you," he explains. "Mother Nature's not watering them anymore. ... There is more responsibility with houseplants than outdoor plants."

More responsibility and more work. So it's smart not to get in over your head.

"You want to start with something a little bit on the small side," says John Schaefer, one of the owners of Schaefer Greenhouses, an 80-year-old institution in Montgomery. "In case you make an error or kill something, it's not a big deal. I'd more or less practice with a few small ones."

Hodgson concurs.

"The most important thing is to start off

with easy plants," he says. "There is a whole series of plants that are practically unkillable. If you start with those, you get encouraged. And if you're working with easy plants you still learn things. So you sort of build your knowledge with easy ones and then you have success."

Instead of choosing that large, beautiful flowering plant that may be too much for rookies, Hodgson suggests something like a philodendron, pothos (*epipremnum aureum*) or mother-in-law's tongue/snake plant (*Sansevieria*). "Those plants, you'd have to be really, really negligent to kill one," he says.

The most popular plant for beginners at Schaefer's is the philodendron.

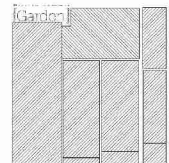
"You can put that just about anywhere," Schaefer says. "Anything in the philodendron family ... there are many types. And dracaena is another one; you can put it in just about any low-light area."

Light and water are the two key factors in houseplants' success. Hodgson says that if a plant isn't getting enough light, it won't be able to use water properly.

"If you get the light right, everything else is easy," he says. "Even the watering is easy. But if you don't have good light, it's not going to be easy to take care of that plant."

Schaefer points out the need for containers with good drainage. (In other words, check that there's a drainage hole at the bottom of the pot you choose, and if there's not a rim attached to collect any excess water, you'll need to place a saucer beneath the pot.) Plants that get too much water can develop root problems, so don't overwater. And check your soil moisture judiciously.

"You can put maybe a dowel, a piece of wood, down into the soil, all the way down to the bottom and pull it out, just like you'd check the oil in your car," Schaefer says. "See how wet it is in the bottom. Sometimes the top dries out. People feel the top of the soil and they say, 'Oh, it's dry and crusty.' But you go down a couple, three inches, and it starts to become more wet. That's the thing you have to be more careful about than anything. Just keep it evenly moist."



And use a little water-soluble fertilizer once a month or so.

Remember, you're taking the reins from Mother Nature.

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## How to make a houseplant happy

As a senior projects manager for **Ambius** ([ambius.com](http://ambius.com)), a company that provides plants to offices, Denise Eichmann knows her greenery. She offers several tips on houseplants:

- Peat-free compost is suitable for all indoor plants.
- Variegated plants — those with leaves with white edges or white flecks — often need more light than their green cousins.
- Plants acclimatize slowly to different surroundings by changing their leaf orientation and structure. Try not to move them around; they may not adapt as easily as you think.
- Prune plants regularly to keep them from becoming leggy.
- Don't dump leftover tea or coffee into plant containers. The sugars left in the compost make it an ideal breeding ground for bugs.
- Use trough planters as natural screens. They reduce

noise and are useful as barriers.

— *W.H.*

For information on houseplants and their care: **[plantcare.com](http://plantcare.com)**, **[gflora.com](http://gflora.com)** or **[urbanext.illinois.edu/houseplants](http://urbanext.illinois.edu/houseplants)**.



Sansevieria (aka snake plant) adds drama — with very little effort on your part.



Staking pothos keeps its vigorous growing habit in check. Cutting stems back also is a good idea.