

Our January meeting brought us horticulture professor Jennifer Hinostroza from Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC), who spoke to us about houseplants and best practices for growing them in various environments. While she provided some tips and techniques she teaches in her Interior Landscaping course at Mt. SAC, her focus was on light requirements, watering, appropriate plant choices for different light levels, temperature requirements, and the benefits of having plants indoors.

Jennifer began by reminding us that most houseplants, come from tropical or sub-tropical regions that have warm temperatures and high humidity - usually with no variation from day to day. They don't require seasonal change to set flowers or seed, and as houseplants are often shorter lived than their wild counterparts. Historically, having interior plants was a sign of wealth, because they were associated with travel and exploration, but today we keep houseplants for a variety of other reasons.

Studies have demonstrated physical and psychological benefits of having plants in our daily environments. They provide air filtration to remove indoor pollutants (a 6" pot or bigger for 100 square feet of floor space is enough), increase humidity, reduce stress in the workplace, and even build feelings of self-worth, because studies have shown that humans have a hard-wired need to care for living things. And, of course, plants provide aesthetic pleasure as well.

Jennifer explained that foliage plants are the most common type of houseplants commercially available and that flowering types are often temporary residents - typically brought in for an occasion or as a seasonal addition. Bromeliads fall

somewhere in-between: their blooms will last for 6 to 8 weeks, but they will not rebloom if living indoors. Cacti and succulents can be grown indoors, but require a lot of light. She explained that in commercial landscapes, flowering plants are replaced every 2 - 4 weeks (so they always look good), and the majority of flowering plants we see indoors are actually better-suited to living outdoors.

The key to successfully growing plants indoors (or on balconies) is to control and improve the environmental conditions that impact them the most: sufficient light,



Photo: Sabine Steinmetz

good drainage, slow-release nutrients, consistent temperatures (fluctuations can be deadly), and humidity. In nature, they are accustomed to 85%-90% humidity vs. the 6% typically found in homes. She also noted that because plants are exposed to a variety of light sources indoors, they may initially suffer leaf drop as they adjust to their new environment. Additionally, their foliage might "pale out" because their ability to produce pigments is significantly lowered when living indoors.

Outdoor plants that live in containers on a patio or balcony do best when their natural living conditions are simulated as closely as possible. Transplanting them from black nursery containers into clay or foam pots as soon as possible will help prevent their soil from getting too hot, and providing some shade is beneficial. Light intensity must also be considered -

too much will kill chloroplasts, bleaching out leaves or causing them to drop, while too little will inhibit photosynthesis, compromising the plant's health. (A PDF of Jennifer's hand-out about plants for varying light conditions can be found at www.socalhort.org.)

Ultimately, the goal should be for plants to maintain on a "linear" level, according to Jennifer. She recommends buying plants at the size you would like them to be, instead of repotting them frequently until they "grow" to a certain size. If they are constantly growing they are probably getting too much light. Indoor plants are not meant to go through seasonal growth and pruning phases like their outdoor cousins. Also, avoid bringing unhealthy plants home, as pest problems can easily be spread. Too little or too much water can both have disastrous results, with overwatering being the most common cause of death. Over-fertilization is the second. Keeping temperatures at 70 - 80 degrees is best, as too much fluctuation is difficult for plants to process.

Jennifer's final recommendations were to select plants based on whether they will survive in your living conditions, because factors such as light, temperature and humidity are not always easily controlled. She closed with a short list of easy maintenance plants that do well in a variety of conditions (see www.socalhort.org), and a brief question and answer session. The presentation was comprehensive, and with the helpful tips provided, perhaps the process of growing indoor plants successfully will become less of a mystery to those who have always considered houseplants to be too much of a challenge.

✂ Sabine Steinmetz

SHARING SECRETS

Our question for January was:

Tell us about your successes and struggles with houseplants, and what your favorites are.



Calatheas do well for me, and I like the variety of foliage patterns.

- Kathy Musial

Fungus gnats! Ugh. I've tried everything and one year later, they are still all over the house! Someone told me about beneficial nematodes, so I will try those next...

- John Christofferson

Fool-proof plants I have grown include: *Aspidistra*, *Clivia*, *Sanseveria* and of course, spider plants (*Chlorophytum*). Also, the "piggyback plants" have done well for me.

- Shirley Marneus

I used to limit myself to EASY houseplants like Snakeplant (*Sanseveria*) and Golden Pothos (*Epipremnum*).

Now I have a few low-light succulents (*Haworthia*), and a Blue Amaryllis (*Griffinia espiritensis*), which is supposed to be an easy houseplant. I'm proud to say it continues to grow, although it hasn't bloomed yet. I will definitely bring it in to the Plant Forum if that ever happens...

- Anonymous

Thank you all for sharing!