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Turning a Brown Thumb Green: A Beginner's Guide to Houseplants

I've had so many college students complain to me that they can't keep houseplants alive. So, I created this beginner's guide out of my personal experience as well as advice given to me by a local plant expert.

Some people might be asking, "why should we even care? What's so great about houseplants anyway?" While they may not be everyone's cup of tea, houseplants are an excellent, low maintenance way to bring color and vibrancy into any space. Whether it's your dorm room, office, or living room, plants will do a lot to brighten up the place. Houseplants also contribute to better air quality; this gives them an advantage over pretty fake plants. Additionally, watching something grow and knowing that you are responsible for that life and growth can work wonders on your mental state. Now that we've established some of the benefits of having houseplants, let's get into some things to keep in mind before getting started.

Rules of Thumb (a green one that is)

1. ***Shop Local.*** Buying from a local plant nursery is probably the best way to make sure that you are starting your houseplant journey on the right foot. Of course, it is very important to support local businesses, but there are other benefits as well! While the plants that are available in big box stores like Lowe's or Home Depot are shipped in

from other farms, the plants at local shops are often grown there and cared for in a much more intentional way. These local shops work hard to make sure that the plants they sell are free from pests, infestations, and diseases; the same cannot be promised at the big box stores. Perhaps one of the most helpful perks of these small shops is that the staff there are extremely knowledgeable and can help advise you every step of the way on your plant journey. Finally, these local plant nurseries are open and carry plants year-round, even when the big box stores stop selling their plants in the winter months.

2. ***Know the plant's needs.*** No matter what plant you are starting out with it is important to understand that plant's needs. The easiest way to find out what a plant needs to be healthy is to talk with an employee at the plant shop where you're buying your little friend. There are also plenty of online sources on how to care for specific plants.

Important things to consider are the following:

- ***Lighting-*** Some plants thrive in bright light, and others in low light conditions. Think about if you have any bright window, or well-lit rooms that would satisfy a light-loving plant. Rooms that get only a little natural light throughout the day are better paired with a low-light plant. One of the biggest pitfalls of new plant owners is putting a plant somewhere they think it will look good without considering the spot's lighting conditions.
- ***Pot and Soil-*** Different plants require different levels of drainage. This affects whether you should put them in a terracotta, plastic, or ceramic pot. Terracotta pots will soak up moisture from the soil and are ideal for plants that like to dry out between waterings. If your plant likes the moisture, you can have fun

picking out a pretty ceramic or plastic pot! Sometimes it is also necessary to use a specific soil mix to encourage either water retention or drainage.

- ***Attention-*** The most important thing to consider is how much effort you are willing to put into keeping the plant alive. Some houseplants thrive on neglect and would be perfect for a person with a busy schedule or a forgetful mind (see Snake Plant below). However, others require frequent and attentive care which may be more suited to a person who has lots of extra free time and wants to have a hobby they can invest time in (see Chinese Money Plant).
3. ***Don't get discouraged.*** Plants can be tricky things and sometimes they do not survive even if you do everything right. It is possible that a plant may die on you because of some unseen disease or infection in its roots. Plants can also experience stress and environmental shock. The important thing is that if you have found a plant that you love, but it continues to die on you, don't give up! Talk to a local expert and do some research to find out if there is something that you can be doing differently for the plant. Even the experts have plants that die on them.

Plants to Get You Started

- ***Pothos-*** This is an excellent plant for beginners. It comes in several different varieties so



there are lots of lovely colors to choose from. It is a viny plant with large leaves that thrives in medium to low-light conditions. You only need to water your Pothos once a week, and although it is viny, it very rarely requires any trimming or pruning. This plant is excellent for hanging baskets or containers and it adds lots of great shape and color to a space.

- ***Snake Plants***- This plant is also known as “Mother-in-Law’s Tongue”. It is a wonderful,



hardy plant that grows slowly and does very well in low-light conditions. This plant requires minimal watering and can even go a couple weeks between drinks. Snake plants have an unusual plant shape and add an interesting look to a space. They also have neat color patterns that add a fun pop to your indoor jungle!

- ***Dracaena***- This is another plant that can help to add some unusual shape to your indoor



garden. Dracaenas come in many different varieties: some are medium height tree-like plants that have long spiky leaves and others are short plants with sturdy leaves. The variety that was recommended to me was the Dracaena Warneckii. This particular variety thrives in low light and requires little water.

More Plants!

The following are plants that I currently own, some brief descriptions of them, and my personal experience with keeping them alive.

- ***Golden Pothos***- Although I currently own two variations of the pothos plant, the golden is



my favorite. I love the color patterns and I am especially attached to this plant because I grew it from cuttings that my mom took from her plant that had gotten too big.

- *Peace Lily*- This is a very simple plant that doesn't do much but give color and shape



variation to my living room. It hasn't rebloomed since I got it, but the leaves continue to look great! It prefers medium light and a good drink every week.

- *Chinese Money Plant*- This lovely little plant is a recent purchase, but I have wanted one



for a very long time. With thin stems and coin-like leaves, it has a lovely and unique shape. It has done very well in my sunny window and likes to be watered every couple of days. I have already seen lots of new growth on this plant!

- *Spider Plant*- While I typically hate anything to do with spiders, this plant is a favorite of



mine. It is very easy to take care of, requires low maintenance, and grows at a rapid pace. The spider plant likes sunny spots and only needs to be watered once a week.

While that is only four of my fourteen plants, I hope that list gives you an idea of the wonderful variation that exists in basic houseplants. Hopefully this guide has helped to get you excited about starting (or continuing) your houseplant journey!

Images courtesy of Google.com