

Friday's Feature

By

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Watch for hitchhikers when you bring plants indoors

Now that chilly weather has arrived in Northwest Florida, many cold-sensitive container plants need to be moved indoors for the winter. Because conditions differ widely between the inside and the outside of your home, a gradual introduction to the indoors is best. Sudden changes in temperature, light and humidity can be traumatic to plants, resulting in yellowed leaves, dieback, wilting, and even death.

You will need to bring your plants indoors before nighttime temperatures dip below 45 degrees F. Many tropical plants will suffer damage at temperatures below 40 degrees F and a few at 50 degrees F.

When we bring in potted plants from the outside, we are always at risk of inviting in unwanted guests--like ants, termites and other pest insects. Soaking the pot in a tub of lukewarm water for about 15 minutes will force insects and other creatures out of the soil. If snails, earthworms or insects burrowed in the soil, you might want to repot the plants, placing a piece of wire screening over the drainage hole to keep them out next year.

Also carefully examine the leaves, especially underneath, for signs of insect damage and insects themselves. The stems, nodes and joints should also be carefully examined as this is where insects like to hide. Use a magnifying glass to detect the presence of very tiny insects like spider mites or mealybugs.

There are a number of non-chemical methods to use if a pest problem exists. Spraying plants with a forceful stream of room temperature water will remove many of the smaller insects. Washing plants every two weeks can also prevent pest problems by not allowing them to become established. This procedure also keeps plants dust free and healthier.

Using a mild soap solution to wash the plants is another way to control insects and clean the plant before moving indoors. Mix two tablespoons of liquid dish soap in a gallon of water and gently wash the bugs off the leaves of the plants with a soft cloth or sponge. It is important to use a very mild soap that does not



Use a hand lens to check for spider mites

Credit: UF/IFAS Photo: Marisol Amador.

contain anti-bacteria or degreaser ingredients.

For a light infestation of aphids or mealybugs, you can also use a cotton ball dipped in rubbing alcohol to eliminate them. Lightly brush the bottom of the leaves where the insects are found. Be careful not to over apply or use too much rubbing alcohol on the swab, as this may burn the foliage.

To prevent shock when you bring houseplants indoors, expose plants gradually to reduced lighting. Usually, if they've been in bright light and you move them into much lower light, expect some leaves to fall off. However, new ones should form as the plants readapt to the lower light. If they've been outside in high light, it's best to put them in similar light indoors like a south window or under plant lights on a timer for 16 hours a day.

Don't overwater! Although our hot summer meant you probably had to water your container plants frequently, indoors they won't require as much water. Let the soil surface get dry to the touch before watering. Don't water during cloudy or rainy weather as plants won't get sufficient light indoors to dry out.

So move those plants indoors and help them continue to grow.



Treat mealybugs prior to bringing plants indoors
Credit: United States National Collection of Scale Insects
Photographs Archive, USDA Agricultural Research Service,
Bugwood.org

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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