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## **As Winter Approaches, Tropical Fern Houseplants Need Special Care**

Ferns are one very common houseplant that brighten up the home during the winter. However, they have some important considerations to ensure that they stay healthy during the cold winter months. Because of cultural changes in how we heat our homes during the winter, most ferns will suffer without environmental modification. The main problem with the winter is that the humidity in houses drops significantly. Ferns will suffer in relative humidity under 50 percent, and almost never grow in locations with humidity under 30 percent, which is common when house heating systems are run. If you have a cooler room with dappled light, that is the place to keep a house fern, as it mimics the natural forest floor environment most ferns grow in. To raise the humidity immediately around the plant, it might be necessary to mist it with a spray bottle or use a humidifier in the room.

Ferns are the most sensitive houseplants to the size of the container they are grown in, and will likely need several repottings as they grow. It is important to choose an appropriately-sized container for the current size of the fern and not try to give extra space for a fern to grow into, as this can cause problems with watering and water availability. A good rule of thumb is to have a container with no more than 1 inch of space between the fern's roots and the edge of the container. Choosing clay or terra cotta containers will mean that you will need to water a little more often, as the container will absorb some of the moisture. If the container is plastic, this will not happen, and watering should be reduced accordingly. Hold off on repotting until it appears that the container can no longer hold the fern – repotting early increases the chance that you will choose a container that is too big for the plant.

Light is also a complicated topic for house ferns, because each fern species is going to have its own unique light requirement. For example, Boston ferns, arguably the most common house fern, need only two hours of indirect sun per day, and should be shaded for the rest of the day. Most fern species will not be able to take direct sun from a south-facing window, and so should be placed near east-facing or north-facing windows instead. You will be able to tell if light is too strong if the leaves begin to scorch. Moving the pots away from direct light will still give most ferns the light they require to photosynthesize.

Because ferns have such low light requirements, they are ideal plants for a garden or landscape that gets little to no sun. They will not tolerate heavy clay or soil with poor drainage, so a site assessment before planting is necessary. Ferns are ideal plants for the north side of

houses where sunlight almost never reaches directly, or for raised beds with high aeration. Ferns will likely need to be divided after several years of growth. This works the same as most other plants – dig up the root ball and halve or quarter, replanting and watering the new plants.

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