

Houseplant Help

SOIL-SALT AND SHOWERS

As soon as spring arrives and the frost has gone all of my houseplants go out into the garden for the summer. I have a great selection of houseplants, and I am not talking wee little 4" pots. I have a Euphorbia in the dining room that is over 6' tall. It was with reluctance that I brought them back into the house in the autumn. Autumn is the second busiest time for a horticulturist and with the start of school, time was at a premium. I dreaded heaving the heavy clay pots through each of the rooms so at least the plants were reasonably dispersed near windows. Carrying the Euphorbia is a two person job; I think all of my friends have assisted in the task of moving him either in or out of the house (I know it's a him since its form and texture are far too rough to be feminine).

Now in the dead of winter I admire them, these tough resilient individuals who have persisted from one neglectful growing season to the next. However, in winter they receive a little more attention than in the midst of their growing season. When snow falls and the wind is howling, it is relaxing to visit with each of my plants and groom and pamper them. I should preface that by saying that I do not pamper plants frequently, they have one chance in the world of 'Pascoe the Garden Guru', they live or die; for some reason all of my houseplants seem to stay alive. I cannot remember the last time I killed a houseplant. Thus they deserve the occasional shadow of interest from their owner. Their independence and resilience often reminds me of cats; they live here with me because they want to, not because they have to.

If I have little to do (a very rare occurrence) then about January or February I haul them into the bathtub. Once, I had guests staying over; they went into the Guest Bathroom one evening and were shocked to find the bath tub occupied by a contingent of green soldiers all basking under the caressing warm spray from the shower. The questions began...

Houseplants can experience two main problems over the winter months, especially if they are not allowed outside for the summer. Soil salt build-up and, particularly in my century home, dust are two common but easily remedied ailments. One of the possible reasons my plants thrive is that their summer holidays are spent in the cooling shade of the garden near an underground sprinkler and forgotten for the duration thus soil salts and dust are eliminated.

A warm shower in the midst of winter will do the same thing to revive and refresh plants. Soil salts can usually be seen as a rusty brown to white scum that builds up around the soil surface and inside edge of the pot. What happens is, while watering does dissolve these salts, the plants sit in a saucer or decorative liner pot and the soil salts are not flushed through the soil, merely dissolved and reabsorbed. After a period of time these salts convert and can become toxic and re-potting with fresh soil may be necessary. However a shower can help dissolve and flush these salts out through the bottom of the pot. It is important to remember that when placing the plants in the shower to remove them from their liner pots and remove all saucers. A gentle twenty minute shower should suffice to flush out the salts.

At the same time while flushing these toxic salts from the soil, you are also washing the dust from their leaves. Leaves have pores, called stomata, which can become clogged. A gentle washing is all that is required to unclog them; no Clearasil needed here.



It is a 'little' work, and I am thankful that the Euphorbia is a desert plant and requires little water, hence it does experience the salt problem common with the others. I remind him of that as I drag his smaller friends into the bathroom. Satisfaction is personified as I see the occasional aphid valiantly attempt the backstroke as he heads for the bathtub drain.

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