

# The Sunday Telegraph Magazine

17 December 2000



YOU  
SHALL  
GO  
TO  
THE  
BALL

THE  
SEASON'S  
PRETTIEST  
PARTY  
DRESSES

#### UMBRELLA PLANT *Cyperus alternifolius*

With its straight stems that can grow up to a metre tall topped by a tuft of grassy leaflets, this member of the rush family is quite easy to look after.

**Light:** grow in bright light.

**Temperature:** average warmth, but slightly cooler in winter.

**Water:** impossible to overwater; stand pot in water (change water every now and then). Liquid feed every fortnight.



## INSIDE STORY

This Christmas we will spend £60 million on pot plants, only to watch them wilt. Andy Sturgeon, author of a new book on the subject

There is no great mystery to how to succeed with pot plants: as with outdoor gardening, you need to pick the right plant for the right place, and to decide on the amount of care you're prepared to give it.

Most indoor plants are extraordinarily easy to look after. Just follow these rules:

- (1) Water and feed them correctly. Most indoor plant deaths are caused by overwatering.
- (2) Most plants require a winter rest, when they will need less water, less feeding and less heat.
- (3) Treat any trouble immediately. Bad doses of pests and diseases are hard to cure.
- (4) Put a plant where it grows best, not just where it looks best.
- (5) Avoid extremes or sudden changes in temperature and light.

#### TEMPERATURE

The best indoor plants are those which like a temperature range of about 18-24°C (65-77°F), because this is how warm we like to keep our houses. Any plant that needs a temperature higher than 24°C (77°F) will also require an increase in humidity to stop the plants dying. Ideally, the temperature should drop at night by about 3-6°C (5-10°F).

Avoid putting plants near danger spots such as radiators, cookers and boilers. Windowsills with strong, direct sunlight pouring through a single pane of glass during the day will heat plants up too much. The space between a curtain and a window traps harmful cold air at night and excludes the benefits of the heated room. Leaves touching external window glass can get too cold, go black and die. Plants near

external doors are subjected to draughts. Though the heat rising from a radiator can be good for some plants, it needs to be deflected with a shelf, and you'll probably have to raise the humidity as well.

#### WATERING

The best test is to push a finger as far as it will go into the potting compost: it should feel damp but not soggy (those clever electronic testers are a waste of time). Tap water is usually fine and should be served at room temperature because cold water can shock a plant, slow down its growth and mark the leaves. Hard water can cause problems for certain plants. The best solution is to use rainwater or a water filter which will remove harmful chlorine and fluoride, or to use the water from a kettle that has boiled and cooled.



**KRIS PLANT** *Alocasia x amazonica*  
 This beautiful waxy-leaved plant can be difficult to grow indoors as it requires both warmth and humidity. It's better off in a conservatory but, as it's so striking, it's worth giving it a go anyway.  
**Light:** bright light, but away from direct sun.  
**Temperature:** at least 20°C (68°F). Avoid cool rooms.  
**Humidity** must be kept permanently high. Keep well away from radiators.  
**Water:** keep compost permanently wet but only just moist in winter.



**CLUB MOSS** *Selaginella* (above)  
 Suitable for bathrooms, this moss is at home in shallow pots of free-draining compost.  
**Light:** keep in medium light away from windows.  
**Temperature:** average warmth but keep the humidity up. It isn't good with central-heating and dry air is fatal.  
**Water:** give it plenty, but don't ever let the pot stand in water.  
**Special needs:** a weak liquid feed once a month is fine.



**LADY'S EARDROPS** *Fuchsia* (left)  
 There are thousands of varieties, most with pod-like flower-buds. You can either buy small plants in spring and discard them after flowering, or overwinter the plants somewhere very cool and put them back on show in spring.  
**Light:** bright light, with a couple of hours of strong sunlight every day.  
**Temperature:** cool.  
**Water:** plentifully but in winter keep fairly dry. Feed every week when in flower.

reveals the secrets of successful indoor planting

## HUMIDITY

A plant breathes through its leaves and thus loses moisture by transpiration. If humidity is very low, a plant will lose too much water and its leaves will shrivel. Humidity is not a problem at low temperatures but as a room heats up the amount of water vapour in the air can't keep pace. A pebble tray is the best solution. Fill a saucer with pebbles or gravel and top it up with water so the plant stands on the pebbles but doesn't touch the water. ■

Styling by Lyndsey Milne  
 'Potted' (Conran Octopus, £16.99) by Andy Sturgeon is published in February and will be available for the special price of £14.99, post-free in the UK, from Telegraph Books Direct (0870 155 7222). Please quote reference OP21