

in the garden by Stephen and Kristin Pategas



STEPHEN & KRISTIN PATEGAS

The Garden Indoors – Maintenance Challenge

The gauntlet has hit the floor - another interior plant has come through the door. It is perfect in every way but how long will that last? Even experienced gardeners give up on trying to grow interior plants. Spindly, see-through, pest-laden and stretched; they either end up in the trash or go back out the door they came through to go into the yard trash or try life in the great outdoors.

Realize that most house plants are expected to be replaced on a regular basis since they are usually growing in less-than-ideal conditions. Rare is the plant that is native to what our interiors

typically provide. So try really hard not to get emotionally attached to them and don't hesitate to toss a past-prime plant. A nasty looking focal point is worse than none at all.

When the plant must go, use the trash heap and not the outside garden. House plants do not belong in our Central Florida gardens. They easily suffer cold damage and some (like pothos) are very aggressive and spread wildly. Once they reach a vertical surface they go into climbing mode and will greedily scale structures and trees. A ficus tree placed outdoors will root through the pot into the ground. If it survives our winters it may get large enough to become a tree protected by municipal code.

Follow these tips and your indoor foliage plants will last longer:

- If you have a brown finger up to the first knuckle then you are properly checking the soil moisture of your plants. Water only when the top inch feels dry to the touch.
- Fertilize once or twice a year using a liquid fertilizer at one-half strength. The goal is to keep them healthy, not encourage them to grow large and outgrow the space.
- Check weekly for insect pests under leaves and on stems. Indoors there is a lack of good bugs to take care of the bad bugs such as spider mites, mealy bugs and scale.
- As light levels indoors change between the winter and summer sun's position in the sky, shift plants to brighter locations and always rotate them in place to encourage even growth.
- If your plants summer outdoors, before bringing them inside do a pot check for any tag-along insects on the foliage and in the soil.

This is a winnable challenge if the right plant enters the house, is placed in the right location, and your finger turns brown at least weekly.

To read about indoor plant selection visit www.theparkpress.com for our April In the Garden. ■



ZZ plant - *Zamioculcas zamiifolia* is low maintenance



The arrowhead vine (*Syngonium*) will climb a tree and create problems.



Use a digit to check the moisture of the soil.

Kristin and Stephen Pategas design landscapes and gardens at their home and business Hortus Oasis in Winter Park. Contact them at garden@hortusoasis.com or visit www.hortusoasis.com and www.pategaionplants.com.

All photography by Stephen G. Pategas/Hortus Oasis