

A GUIDE to BUYING AND CARING FOR HOUSEPLANTS

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The top 10 (or so) indoor plants to choose

Walk into any nursery and you will likely be bombarded with hundreds of plants to choose from. Where to start your collection? The list below provides you with a good place to start, whether you're looking for an indoor plant on your desk at work or if you want to attempt something larger like a Green Wall. If you don't want your plants to die as fast as a bunch of flowers, then read on.

1. ZZ plant (**Zanzibar gem** *Zamioculcas zamifolia*)

- ❑ Hands down one of the most tolerant indoor plants. Lush green leaves on a long stem. They are pretty pricey as they are hard to propagate quickly, and slow growing when they are young. They will put up with low light, forgetting to water them, and general ignoring. Of course, they will do much better with more light, some more water. Do not overwater (they like it dry – they have a thing like a potato as part of the roots that holds water).

2. Peace Lily (**Spathaphylum**)

- ❑ Another relatively easy plant to look after. It has dark green lancet leaves. It doesn't get too large and does well in mid-low light areas. You know when you are doing well as it flowers in summer.
- ❑ Once you master the normal variety, there are quite a few different varieties available, larger leaves, smaller leaves, and several variegated varieties.

3. Creepers and climbers

- ❑ **Devils Ivy (Pothos)**. This is a generic name for a group of climbing or trailing plants. Easy to grow, they either grow up a pole, or hang down from a basket. Lots of different varieties and variegations. Easy to propagate, and hence share.
- ❑ **Philodendrons**. A huge family of varied plants from large leaved clumping or trunking species to many that grow as creepers and climbers. Popular easy ones to care for are P. Xanadu, P. Sellom, P. Micans. There are lots of new ones on the market with dark leaves, red leaves, golden leaves. These plants are happy in moderate to low light. Keep moist but not wet and feed for faster growth.
- ❑ **Swiss cheese plants (Monstera)**. The common variety is *M. deliciosa*. Easy to grow, prefers to climb something, and gets very large leaves (1 metre across at maturity). There are a few varieties now available with a bit of searching, some with smaller leaves, others variegated, and extremely expensive. All develop holes in their leaves once they mature and climb.
- ❑ **Ivy**. Yep that's right, normal boring old English Ivy makes a great house plant. Cut some off an outside plant you like (the variegated ones are prettier), put it in a glass of water until it gets roots, and they do well indoors.

4. Dragon Tree (**Dracaena marginata**)

- ❑ A good tall growing plant, which forms a slim trunk with branches and slim leaves with a dark red edge. The brighter the light, the faster and stronger it grows. One of the few indoor plants that doesn't mind direct sun.

5. Spider plant (**Chlorophytum comosum**)

- ❑ Really easy to grow, and propagate. Your grandmother probably had one. Bright light sees it grow with stronger colour and eventually the appearance of many baby plants on long stems. Great in hanging pots or on a shelf. If grown outside it can take over the garden...

6. Ficus

There are many fig trees that grow well as indoor plants.

- ❑ **Fiddle Leaf Fig (*Ficus lyrata*)**. Super popular right now. Huge leaves on slim stems. Not as easy to grow as the other varieties. Keep the water up, and give it bright light. Feed, and keep the bugs at bay.
 - ❑ **Rubber Tree**. Another nanna plant from the 70s. There are lots of new colours on the market these days. They are easy to grow, but can get a bit leggy (lose their lower leaves) with old age.
 - ❑ **Baby Ben**. A smaller leaved ficus. It grows like a small tree inside, don't over water it, and it does need reasonable light, otherwise it will yellow off and lose leaves. It can turn into a massive tree in the garden (these are planted down the middle of Anzac Highway).
7. **Ferns** (Don't let them dry out!)
- ❑ **Boston Fern/Sword fern (*Nephrolepis exaltata*)**. The newer Macho variety is a good place to start. Long arching fronds, it can get huge.
 - ❑ **Maiden Hair Fern**. Unfortunately, a bit like a bunch of flowers for most people. They are native to most of Australia, so can grow anywhere (even in the Adelaide Hills by streams). These hate being dry, hate it too windy, hate it too hot. Get the balance right and they are so beautiful. Don't be afraid to cut them back to nothing in late winter and watch them sprout. Bathrooms with bright light are one of the best spots to put them.
 - ❑ **Other ferns**. The range is huge, endless even. Having tried many in the office, the sword ferns cope the best. Most other ferns need higher humidity to do well.
8. **Palms**
- Like ferns, there are many to choose from. However, the range easily available in Adelaide is limited by our cold winters. The following three and their relatives are generally quite easy.
- ❑ **Parlour Palm**. Small slow growing palm. Cheap and easy to find. Looks great even as a tiny palm, they usually come in pots with lots of plants together. The biggest issue with these is spider mite. They can infest a plant and strip the colour from the leaves. Otherwise, super easy to grow.
 - ❑ **Kentia Palm**. A Victorian era classic. This has been used as a house plant for 150 years. Native to Lord Howe Island, they are a tough slow growing palm good for low light, bright light, or eventually direct sun when they get older. The usual failing is over watering. They don't really like wet feet, they will rot off and die...
 - ❑ **Lady Palm (*Raphis excelsis*)**. Native of Japan, a really elegant palm that clusters, forming a thicket eventually. Fine fan shaped leaves and a slightly furry trunk. They prefer brighter light to do well.
9. **Cast iron plant (*Aspidistra*)**
- ❑ Another classic house plant in English houses 150 years ago. Simple dark green leaves that grow straight out of the soil. Slow growing, hard to kill, and happy with neglect. There are a few newer variegated varieties on the market now, but the original is faster growing and near on un-killable.
10. **Succulents (DO NOT OVERWATER!)**
- ❑ **Mother In-laws tongue (*Sansevieria trifasciata*)**. Also known as snake plant. It is slow creeping succulent that forms stiff tall leaves. These tolerate very low light and can also cope with direct sun. There are lots of varieties of *Sansevieria*, some with slim cylindrical leaves, others with short leaves, and many variegated varieties. All easy to care for – just don't over water them. They are related to cacti after all.
 - ❑ **Pencil cactus - *Rhipsalis***. Another recently popular plant, more in the curiosity area, but they make amazing hanging plants with their long super thin leaves. They cope really well inside, they need shade. Again, don't over water.
 - ❑ **String of Pearls**. These cute little balls of green on a string are stunning if you can find a spot that they like. Bright light, water when they have dried out and give them somewhere to hang, and you might be fine... or not. They rot off really easily.

How not to kill your indoor plants.

1. Do not overwater.
2. Do not overwater...
3. They are living things, so give them some light. Very few indoor plants like direct sun, it will burn them, so bright indirect works best. Often the brighter the light, the better the growth on most plants. Even those that don't need bright light.
4. Use good soil. You don't feed yourself the cheapest food around, so get some good soil for your plants.
5. Feed me!!! Fish emulsion and fertilizer. Go light on with the fertilizer until you know how the plant handles it. Fish emulsion, you cannot overdo (apart from the smell). It's like tonic for a plant. It doesn't make them grow faster (that's what fertilizer does), but it makes them stronger, more resilient.
6. Don't let them dry out for long. But see points 1 & 2 above.
7. Use rainwater if you can.

SOIL

The usual advice is to buy the best soil you can afford. Some plants like well-draining soil (like succulents), others don't mind it a bit wetter (ferns). There are many varieties of soil on the market now. Succulent mix is a great for succulents (surprise surprise!), but also good for other plants that like free draining soil.

WATER

Adelaide water is not great for plants. Rainwater is best if you can get it. It is the salts in Adelaide water that causes the problems. Chlorine evaporates quite quickly so that is less of an issue. A surprising amount of plants seem to do just fine on our water, but all do better with rainwater. If you become obsessive about water, then reverse osmosis is the way to go, but that takes time and money, and not many plants are worth the effort and money.

POTS

Indoors I tend to use self-watering pots. I have way too many plants to keep them all watered all the time. I love terracotta pots for the patina they get over time, but they are not the best for most indoor plants, as they dry out very quickly. That said, they are good for succulents if you watch them. Glazed terracotta is good too, usually with a saucer to catch your overwatering. Make sure all pots have drain holes. Over watering and having plants sit in stagnant water are sure ways to kill them.

TROUBLE SHOOTING

Bugs

There are several common indoor bugs that will have their way with your plants if not kept under control. They can all be dealt with easily with treatments, both chemical, and natural.

- ❑ **Spider mite.** Tiny little spider like critters that suck the sap out of your plants and weave a fine web on the back of leaves. They make plants look drained and pale. Usually an issue where the humidity is low – air conditioned spaces are a great breeding ground for them.
- ❑ **Mealy bugs.** White fluffy bugs that suck sap and can weaken and kill a plant. They can infest a plant in weeks, then lay their eggs so they keep coming back. Treat fast and quarantine the plant. Even though they seem like they can hardly move, they manage to somehow get to all the adjacent plants.
- ❑ **Scale.** Hard little shells on the stems and underside of leaves. You can pick them off by hand, but best to spray to deal with them. They are often farmed by ants, which live off the sweet sticky liquid scale secretes.
- ❑ **Thrips or fungus gnats.** These little tiny fly-like sap suckers feed on the roots and live in the moist shallow top soil. They will not immediately kill your plants, so don't stress. They are more annoying than they are a problem. They are really hard to completely

eradicate, but they can be kept mostly under control. Unfortunately, they are found in pretty much all potting soils, so it is a constant battle. A soil drench of insecticide plus a leaf spray works, but you need to keep it up to get them under control. One way I have heard of that works is to put about 1cm of playground sand on top of the soil of every plant. That stops them getting in and out of the soil where they reproduce. But that looks pretty unsightly and is hard to maintain. I am still hunting for other effective methods of control.

Droopy

Not enough water, or over watering and rotting. Underwatering is easy to see, dry soil as far as you can stick your finger in. Over watering means you need to let it dry out, and stay mostly dry.

Crispy ends of leaves

Either underwatering (see above) or the air is too dry, or the water too salty and hard. Sometimes it is just the wrong plant for Adelaide (grown in a nursery in sunny humid Queensland, shipped down on a truck, and stuck on the shelf in a shop).

Spots on the leaves

Could be over watering, or bugs, maybe burn spots from sun, or frost.

Shopping!!

The best bit.

Obvious spots like garden centres, Bunnings, Ikea, etc. These are good places for the easy to access plants. Handy for quick affordable purchases of hardy things and good for filling a green wall (see list above – just because it is in the shop, does not mean it will grow here). BUT, remember most of these plants arrived on the truck from Queensland yesterday, or the day before (or a week or 3 ago). They will be in shock. You then take them home, and they are in more shock... good bright light – NO DIRECT SUN, fish emulsion. No fertilizer initially (it can burn). Not too much water, but do not let them dry out.

If you want to get more adventurous then some of the private garden centres stock some interesting stock. Enough to keep the avid collector out of trouble for a good solid house full of plants.

If you turn into a crazy house plant person (no experience here personally...), then you are on to specialty nurseries, online purchases, and finally eBay and plant meets and swaps.

Local nurseries:

I have listed a few of the ones closer in to town, plus a few hills ones. There are lots more out there, this is not meant to be a definitive list:

- Cleveland
- Crafers Garden Centre
- Heynes
- Jungle in Willunga
- Morgan Park
- Norwood Garden Centre
- Prospect Nursery
- Semaphore
- Virginia

Specialty nurseries

Foliage Plant Studio. Run as a small side business in Hindmarsh. Great service, amazing selection of weird plants and some quality more normal plants. Check online for opening hours.

Broadly Green, Aldinga. For the more adventurous plant nerd. Ted has some amazing gems hidden in his somewhat out of control shade house. Worth at least a visit. I can't help myself,

I spend at least an hour crawling through the undergrowth in the shade house hunting for things I might have missed last time.

Charlie and Jack. Way down south (water bag trip), hiding in the back streets of Victor, an elegant curated plant shop, along with some other nice design items.

Hillside Herbs. For a great range of succulents, and herbs of course.

Further afield

Interstate, Bunnings has less of a hold on the plant sales market. Melbourne has some amazing plant shops. Eye opening selections, great variety, and quite a few will ship to Adelaide. The quirky Collectors Corner (try and resist buying an Air plant there...), Plant By Packwood, Fitzroy Nursery, Lygon Street Nursery, The Plant Society, Nature Boy North to name just a few.

ONLINE

Ok, here's trouble...

This is serious addiction territory. Once you dive this deep, there is no turning back.

I usually start by googling something rare, and get lost down the internet rabbit hole. I buy seeds from overseas (totally legit – customs open each packet on the way in to make sure they are safe), but seeds take ages, so plants are the goal. That means buying from somewhere in Australia. Usually the eastern states. Shipping can add up, so best to buy a few at a time (no encouragement necessary here...).

There are so many nurseries that ship plants, it would be hard to mention all them.

These are some smaller specialist ones:

- Home of House Plants
- PLANTessence
- The Leafery Room

Bigger volume ones:

- Plants in a box (good mixed selections for getting started, or further addicted), and you don't have to leave your seat – they arrive neatly packed in a box.
- Lush Plants

Then we get to the Queensland ones.

- Equatorial Exotics

Specialist ones

- Verigris for ferns
- Yamina Rare Plants

Finally. eBay. For the true plant nerd, it is hard to find a better collection of obscure plants. Many of the sellers are from Queensland again, and have some amazing rare plants to sell, sometimes for silly money. Like \$500+ silly money... my worst (or best) is \$350. Not sure it was worth it, but you know, I just had to have it... Anyway, searching for rare house plants, or specific varieties will get you on to some of the sellers. From there it is all downhill. Some have shops, but the rarer plants always go to auction.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Facebook and Instagram have a scary amount of plant nerds (crazy plant people is the term they tend to use). Via Instagram I have met (face to face even) a bunch of great people who, like me, get excited by plant identification, variegation, leaf shape, flower spikes... the biggest problem with this area is education. The more you know is out there, the more you

want it... Instagram has made me more than double my collection of overpriced rare plants. Mix that with eBay and I am not sure I can afford to eat... (not really, I am fine...).

So, there you have it. A brain dump from a certified crazy plant person. If you are like me and have an addictive personality type – STAY AWAY, or be all obsessed. I even plan my trips anywhere around nurseries that are close by, just in case they have something I don't have yet! Will it ever stop?