

The Driftwood Garden Diary

with Geoff Stonebanks



Aloe vera



Aloe zebrina



Snake plant

How to nurture your favourite house plants through the winter

IF, like me, you love houseplants then there is plenty to take care of indoors during the cold weather. They grow happily in average household temperatures, even though lots are from tropical climes and can cope with lower temperatures, down to 13C (55F) degrees.

Excessive heat in the house will not only be expensive in the current climate but from the plant's point of view it actually dries the air and will often do more harm than good to a lot of houseplants, many of which will require humidity in order to thrive.

Areas near windows can also create a dramatic drop in temperature, so try to keep your plants away from both hot radiators and cold draughts, although it is not always as easy as it might seem.

Through the winter months you need to reduce watering. Personal experience has always taught me that it's better and sometimes safer to under water than overwater. Don't feed them either, let plants enjoy their dormancy by placing them in bright areas to get the most indirect sunlight they can.

I have quite a collection of houseplants, greatly augmented through the winter months by many succulents, which take refuge from the winter weather in the front and back porches of the house, between late October and early May.

A few I have had much success with are listed below.

The first, are members of the Sansevieria family commonly known as the Snake Plant.

They are real survivors, even if you are a self-confessed "plant killer". They only need to be watered once every few weeks. Native to Africa, notably Madagascar, and southern Asia, these are the perfect houseplants.

They will grow best in bright, filtered light and will also tolerate partial light conditions, so if they are in a darker corner in your home, you don't need to worry too much.

Check them out as there are many varieties, in all shapes and sizes, to choose from.

Aloe zebrina forms chunky looking rosettes of variegated

green and cream leaves, each of which is encased in a serrated orange border; this showy succulent will flourish on a bright windowsill in any contemporary setting.

Place it in a bright spot and in spring and summer, water when the compost gets dry, but make sure it never sits in excess water for any length of time. In autumn and winter cut back on the watering but do not let it dry out completely. Avoid a humid atmosphere and in the warmer months, open a window or door occasionally so it can enjoy the fresh air. It produces pale but striking red tubular flowers on tall stems if you are lucky.

Another great choice is the aloe vera, commonly grown as a houseplant, it is known for its leaves which contain a soothing gel used on sunburns and other skin irritations.

With over 300 species, this tropical succulent features fleshy lance-shaped leaves with jagged edges that grow out from a basal rosette. Given the right growing conditions, spiky flowers will appear on the end of stalks in shades of yellow, red, or orange. Young plants don't generally flower, and aloe vera can take years to produce flower stalks.

Still, this fast-growing succulent will reach its mature size in three to four years and produces pups that can be repotted or given as gifts to other plant lovers.

No green thumbs are required either. The leaves are grey to green and sometimes have white spots on their surfaces. The gel from the leaves of aloe vera is a common ingredient in many beauty products as it hydrates and soothes hair and skin.

Another really easy set of plants to look after are tillandsia or air plants. Provided the atmosphere is not too dry they can survive with water misting and the occasional bath. They should never be planted in soil and be provided with bright, filtered light. I have a collection of about ten different ones arranged on my desk.

They hail from Mexico and South America and are so-named because they use their short, wiry roots to



Geoff with a Brazilian fuchsia

attach themselves to branches, cliff-faces, even electricity and telephone lines, rather than rooting in soil.

One of my outdoor plants that becomes an indoor one in the winter months is the Brazilian fuchsia. An exquisite winter flowering shrub. This unusual tender shrub will brighten up the winter months with its tropical, two-tone, tubular flowers.

The dangling blooms are borne in profusion from winter to early spring, against a background of dark, evergreen foliage.

Also known as *Justicia rizzinii*, it is an exotic evergreen shrub that makes a neat and compact container plant – perfect for a warm conservatory or heated greenhouse.

Read more of Geoff's garden at www.driftwoodbysea.co.uk



Tillandsia