

SummerWinds Nursery *Caring For Your Tropical Houseplants*



The Tropical Biome

The vast majority of houseplants come from tropical environments – success with these plants lies in understanding their biome and finding small ways that we can mindfully make our homes more like theirs.

Temperature

Tropical rainforests exist near the equator, between the Tropic of Cancer (23°27'N) and the Tropic of Capricorn (23°27'S) – because of the steady influx of solar radiation at the equator, temperatures are high, and fluctuate very little throughout the year, consistently remaining between 70 and 85°F. Our homes tend to mirror this kind of warm, stable environment, making it easy for tropical plants to adapt.

In Our Homes

Since your tropical plants like your home because of its stable temperatures, try to keep them away from heating or cooling units that can cause sharp fluctuations in temperature or cold drafts.

Light

Rainforests are divided into three main layers:

the Canopy : densely packed with vegetation , the canopy is composed largely of trees that can grow to 250ft or more, woody vines that clamber up these giants in search of sunlight, and epiphytes (non-terrestrial plants that live entirely without soil, growing on the canopy trees instead, such as orchids, bromeliads, and mosses)

the Understory : made up of vines, palms, smaller trees and ferns, this level receives only a fraction of the overall light – most is blocked out by the canopy above – this tolerance to lower light is one of the main reasons that the vast majority of houseplants originate at this level.

the Ground Level: very little light or rainfall actually reaches the ground level because both are blocked and absorbed by the upper layers. Very few plants grow here.

In Our Homes

Most tropical plants will thrive in spaces with relatively bright, ambient light – diffused light throughout the space mimics the filtration of the Canopy.

Rainfall

Perhaps the most defining facet of Rainforests is apparent in their name – rainfall in these regions is extremely high (up to 400 inches per year) and tropical plants cope with this alongside the consistent heat through transpiration—a process not unlike sweating – which allows them to release moisture absorbed by their root systems back into the air through their iconically broad leaves. Not only does this have a cooling effect, but it also creates intense local humidity, and is even partially responsible for the formation of rain-clouds – large rainforests can generate as much as 75% of their own rainfall.

In Our Homes

Water less frequently at the soil line, and mist more often – those beautiful broad leaves, while an advantage for temperature and moisture regulation near the equator, work against your plants in dry climates like ours. (Which, of course, we make even drier by running air conditioning or fans in the summer and turning on heaters or building fires in the winter). Because of their large surface area, they are constantly losing moisture to the air around them, making them even more sensitive to fluctuations in temperature, and making you more likely to respond to their stress signals with overwatering, which can quickly result in rot and soil-borne fungus as pockets of oxygen are crowded out of the medium. Water in a rainforest is constantly cycling, and spends more time in the air than it does in the soil – the soil around your tropical plants should never dry out entirely, and should never be swampy. Other solutions to increase humidity without waterlogging your plant include:

products like Leaf Shine, which can help tropical plants retain moisture by encouraging lower rates of transpiration a drainage tray filled with decorative pebbles and a small amount of standing water can create a microclimate beneath those big leaves that is wetter than the surrounding environment, and the pebbles will keep your plant up out of the puddle setting up a humidifier – those who experience respiratory ailments often find relief in oxygen-rich, humid environments, and tropical plants are a perfect fit! You bring the humidity; they'll bring the oxygen!

Soil Composition

Given the incredible species diversity in tropical rainforests, it would be easy to assume that rainforest soil is nutrient-rich, but in fact, the opposite is true. The heavy rains of this biome wash organic matter from the soil and leach away most of the nutrients stored in it. As a result, tropical plants have evolved to take up available nutrients very quickly – and this means that heavy fertilization can cause nutrient burn.

In Our Homes

Steer clear of high-intensity synthetic fertilizers like Miracle Grow and opt instead for gentle liquid fertilizers like Eleanor's VF-11, or slow-release granular formulas like Osmocote's Outdoor & Indoor Slow Release Plant Food. When transplanting, choose a lightweight peat-based potting soil with additives like perlite or pumice to hold oxygen around their roots.



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