

Growing in low-light areas

By DR. SMITH

If you Google "growing house plants in low light areas" what you will find are various lists of plants that "LOVE the Dark" (looking at you, Garden Therapy). This is a lie. There is no plant that loves the dark. There are plants, however, that can tolerate low-light conditions. There are also some less low-light-tolerant plants that can deal with these low-light conditions if we give them a little help. The truth is that these plants will rarely grow quickly and will usually be more susceptible to root-rot unless you implement some important 'tricks' I have discovered.



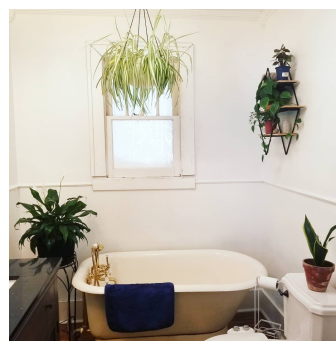
Plants in my extremely low-light bathroom.

The most important care tip for low-light plants is to leave them alone. I usually find that people will over-water their low-light plants to the point where their roots start to 'choke.' You see, roots also need to breathe and (with a few exceptions) they cannot do this in a highly saturated potting media. To understand why low-light plants need less water, we need to review how plants utilize water. A plant 'pulls' water up their tissues in a very passive way. A gradient is formed as water is lost from the leaves through specialized openings called stomata. These generally

only open when the plant wants to photosynthesis. When they don't have a lot of light to work with, they won't open their stomata as much and thus will not pull water up from the pot as quickly.

Besides the roots getting 'choked' by over-saturated and low-oxygen conditions, there is also a greater chance of getting a plant disease called 'root rot.' This is because standing water creates a perfect environment for certain bacteria and fungi that love to munch on the roots. It is usually a fungus that causes this condition in houseplants, and it can be hard to overcome (I'll cover techniques to recover from root rot in a future article).

Another 'trick' to growing plants in low-light areas is to increase the light artificially. Contrary to some opinions, you don't necessarily need specialized lights to help these low-light tolerant plants. You can simply turn on your lights during the day in these areas. I make sure to turn on my lights in my bathroom every morning. This small amount of additional light has made the plants I have in this area much happier, without having to break the bank or compromise aesthetics with specialized grow lights.



Uncompromised aesthetic.

Which plants are best for low-light areas? I'm glad you asked! These are my current favorites since they do well with neglect and are generally easy to care for as well:

- *Spathiphyllum spp.* (AKA: Peace Lily)
- *Dracaena trifasciata* (AKA: Snake Plant)

- *Philodendron hederaceum* (AKA: Heartleaf Philodendron)
- *Chlorophytum comosum* (AKA: Spider Plant)
- *Fittonia albivenis* (AKA: Nerve Plant)
- *Zamioculcas zamiifolia* (AKA: ZZ Plant)
- *Syngonium podophyllum* (AKA: Arrowhead Plant)
- *Hedera helix* (AKA: English Ivy)
- *Epipremnum aureum* (AKA: Golden Pothos)
- *Adiantum pedatum* (AKA: Maidenhair Fern)

You'll be successful with these plants in low-light conditions if you make sure they have well-draining potting media, a pot with holes for draining, periods where they almost completely dry out between watering, and some supplemental light.

Plant of the Week: *Dracaena trifasciata*

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Meet *Dracaena trifasciata* (dra-SEE-nah try-fas-ee-AY-tuh), also known as the Snake Plant and the Mother-in-Law's Tongue, among other names. It was also called *Sansevieria trifasciata* up until 2017, and you may still see them labeled as such. This is a great plant to have in your home. It has amazing colorization, it is easy to care for, and it adds a very architectural-looking element to your plant collection.



Ceylon Bowstring Hemp variety.

The best way to learn how to take care of a new plant is to get to know what environmental conditions it grew in the wild. Snake Plants are native to tropical West Africa and can be found as a weed in some parts of northern Australia. It has adapted to environments which experience periods of extreme drought by only opening their stomata at night to prevent water from escaping the leaves via photosynthesis. They have a really neat ability to store oxygen inside their cells during the night, to be utilized during the day when the sun is out. They naturally only experience saturated soil conditions periodically. So, how can we mimic these conditions in our homes?



Bath-time for plant soaking.

These plants are very well adapted to drought, but they are not adapted to long-term saturated conditions. They also have adapted to utilize water in the soil extremely well, so we need to recreate a similar environment by modifying our watering schedule. You should let these plants dry out almost completely before watering. When they are in need of watering, it is best to do a soaking method by filling a basin with water and allowing the potting media to soak up the water from the bottom for at least 20 min (more if you have a larger pot).



Black Gold variety.

The Snake Plant loves being in indirect, bright light. However, it can tolerate low-light conditions very well. This has made it a popular houseplant and one of my top recommendations for beginner

houseplant enthusiasts.

One major consideration when choosing a new houseplant is to check toxicity levels for animals, especially if you have a pet that loves to munch on greenery. This plant contains saponins, which are mildly toxic to cats and dogs. Although not extremely dangerous, ingestion can lead to an upset stomach and diarrhea in our fur-covered housemates. If ingested in VERY large doses, it can also result in swelling of

the tongue. The good news is that it is relatively safe for the curious masticators. However, any plant you bring in should have supervised time with your dogs and cats first to see if they are interested in it. If you have a very curious or plant-hungry creature, place this one out of reach.

Until next time: remember to stop worrying and learn to love the greenery!
