

Green thumb easily acquired if philodendron, ivy selected

House plants have grown to be a fad in the last year, according to two local plant retailers.

In downtown Lincoln alone two new shops dealing in plants have sprouted. Plants, especially popular with students, have become an integral part of residence hall room and apartment decor.

Commenting on the recent increase in plant sales, a long-time Lincoln florist said, "It's amazing how people are going after them (house plants)."

Another local plant retailer recommended three types of plants for beginners to grow indoors: philodendrons, ivies and dracaena. He said these were the most popular plants sold for interior decoration.

"That's just because they're the easiest to grow and people have the best luck with them," he said.

He said his shop also deals in many more exotic plants, pointing out the more than 300 varieties he sells.

The florist recommended any type of philodendron or scheffleria for the beginner, but "they're going into all varieties. People are learning how to take care of plants, so they are growing plants that require more care," he said. The first two would do well in residence hall rooms because they can take the dry air found in the rooms, he added.

However, "with proper conditions, you can grow just about any type of tropical plant," he said. Many tropical plants require high humidity and frequent watering plus carefully controlled sunlight.

Both retailers said the philodendron was one of the most popular indoor plants. It can grow to practically any size and some grow in vines which will climb or hang.

The philodendron is a tropical plant of South America and naturally grows in a shaded environment. As with most of the easily maintained plants, it requires indirect sunlight and daily watering, according to the retailer.

"The most favorable location for them would be in an eastern window where they get morning sunlight," he said.

George Abraham cited three reasons for the failure of indoor plants in his book *The Green Thumb Book of Indoor Gardening*: poor selection, neglect and injurious gases.

The experts agreed that the most important factors contributing to the success of plants are the amount of sunlight, humidity and frequency of watering.

If your windows are on the north side or the south side of a building, it might make a difference in the amount of light and therefore the types of

plants you can grow, the retailer said.

Although most house plants are shade-loving plants, people tend to not give them enough light, the florist said. Indirect indoor lighting is much different than direct sunlight.

Philodendrons need intense, though filtered, light, according to Abraham. "A weak yellowish color in the leaves of an otherwise healthy plant indicates too much light," he wrote.

Drainage is an important factor in watering plants, according to the experts. Clay pots usually have a hole in the bottom to allow for the drainage of excess water, but if the pot you're using doesn't allow for drainage, you can place charcoal and gravel in the bottom of the pot to absorb the excess water, the retailer said.

The soil should never be allowed to dry out, according to Abraham, but too much also water also should be avoided.

"More house plants are killed by improper watering than any other cause," he wrote.

"Basically, give plants a good watering whenever they need it," said the florist. He cautioned that plants "don't like wet feet."

Humidity must be considered with many types of plants. Ideally, the humidity should be 80% to 90% according to Abraham. He said humidity often drops to 12% in many rooms, which is lower than the Sahara Desert.

The florist suggested putting a tray of moist sand under potted plants to encourage humidity in small rooms. Plastic or metal misters also can be used to spray plants with a fine mist of water.

Soil type depends on the type of plant, according to the plant store operator. While plants such as a cacti require sandy soil, many plants require rich moist soil. "Philodendrons will grow out of almost any soil," he said.

Care also must be taken to keep the plant leaves clean, according to both retailers. "We use warm water to clean the leaves unless the plant is really tough," said the plant seller. He recommended a small amount of detergent added to the water if water alone was not sufficient to remove dirt.

He discouraged the use of polishes, leaf cleaners, mayonnaise or milk on leaves because "anything outside of water will clog up the pores."

Plants should be cleaned whenever furniture is dusted, he said.

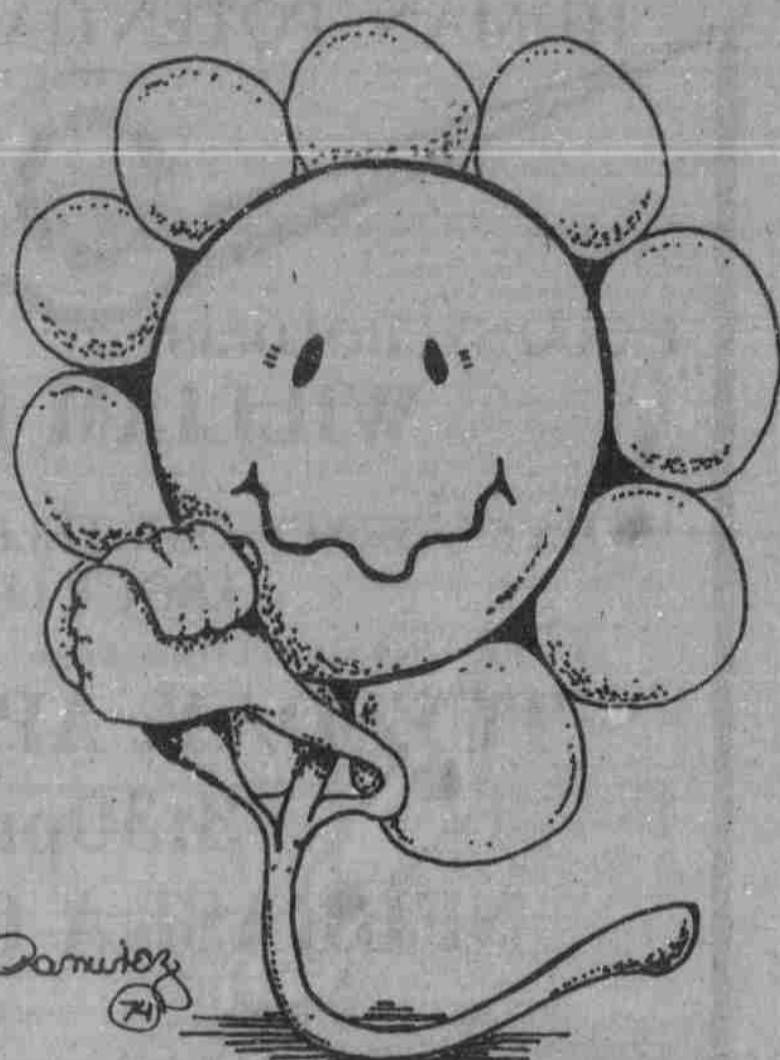
The experts recommended feeding plants with liquid plant food once or twice a month. Small doses should be poured directly into the foil.

Abraham recommended commercially prepared plant foods, but the local plant seller recommended fish emulsion—liquid fish fertilizer—because it is organic. Used once a month and twice a month in summer, it will double the growth rate of plants, he said.

Many of the more exotic plants require special care which is not necessary for more common house plants, said the plant store operator.

"We're more into plants that are kind of a challenge," he said. "We're going for variety—lots of different types of plants."

House plants retail for \$5 and up, according to the florist, but many smaller plants can be purchased for about \$1. The average price range for larger plants is \$8 to \$15.



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