

It's not easy being green

Indoor plants for not-so-green thumbs

By Candace Leigh

It is the capricious nature of urban dwellers that leads to their plants' early demise. Although most would-be green thumbs prune and water like Martha for a week or two, they are soon distracted by shiny new gadgets.

If you're aching to prove that you can nurture more than goldfish crackers, and even if you've managed to kill your plastic fern, here are a few greens that will thrive through spotty care.

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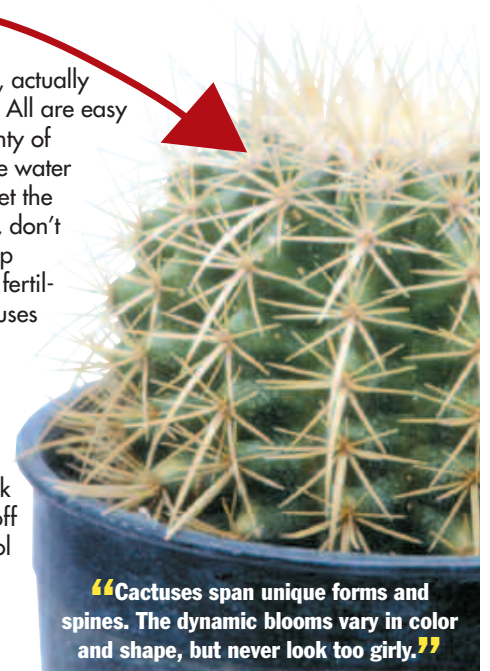
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SUCCULENTS

This group, which sounds delicious, actually includes cactuses, agaves, and aloes. All are easy to grow and maintain, preferring plenty of bright, indirect light. They require little water — just mist or pour only enough to wet the soil around the roots. When in doubt, don't water. Create your own soil with sharp sand or coarse grit. Use a little liquid fertilizer a couple of times a season. Cactuses span unique forms and spines. The dynamic blooms vary in color and shape, but never look too girly. Most small specimens are available from \$2 to \$8. While the cactus is for show, the aloe is practical. If you prick yourself on a succulent spine, break off the tip of an aloe leaf and use the cool gel as a balm for your wound.



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POTTED HERBS

A kitchen window garden is both aromatic and delectable. Fresh herbs are pretty pricey at the organic grocery, but pre-potted plants are only \$2 to \$3. Good herbs for beginners include rosemary, sage, sweet basil, mint, sweet marjoram, tarragon, thyme, chives, and parsley (for garnish). They'll grow indoors, but will require access to sunlight and good soil. For proper drainage, add an inch of gravel to the bottom of each pot before adding soil. Use mismatched coffee mugs or fancy teacups instead of terra cotta pots, but drill a small hole in the bottom of each to keep plants well-drained. Don't drench them, but do keep them moist. To quick-dry culinary herbs, place leaves on a cookie sheet in the oven for a couple of hours at 180 degrees. Add a little zing to basic dishes: Enhance pork with rosemary, chicken with tarragon, potatoes with chives or dill, tomato sauces with basil or oregano, and iced tea or cocktails with fresh mint.

TERRARIUMS

If you're willing to roll up your sleeves and work, you can create a mini landscape inside with a terrarium. Using a clear container as large as an aquarium or as small as a brandy snifter, put together a collection of plants that create their own humid climate. The condensation under glass allows the plants to go

for long periods without watering. Using a long-handled spoon, spread gravel over the bottom of your chosen container. Add a thin layer of activated charcoal, followed by a thin layer of sphagnum moss. Finally, spread a layer of terrarium soil, or potting soil with building sand mixed in. Choose compatible small plants that vary in silhouette and texture for variety. Remember that your container can be viewed from all angles, so arrange your landscape for balanced aesthetics. Cover the completed project with a piece of clear glass or plastic. Even if the terrarium is left slightly open, moisture should still form on the lid. OK, this is a little more labor intensive than buying a cactus, but it's also more impressive. Add a live lizard or frog for a vivarium. Just don't forget to give the critters a water supply.

For something on the wilder side, pick up a Venus' flytrap. Inarguably cool. Thai pepper plants also are hearty and produce masses of mini bright red and yellow waxy peppers. Beware the bite! They are very spicy and will burn your eyes out if you forget to wash your hands after touching. (Maybe this is a better plant for your enemies.)

Whatever you choose, lavish a little creativity and affection on them. Just don't be afraid to get your hands dirty.

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