



Begonias offer incredible variety in shape, texture and color. Make them the next trend. Kenneth Setzer - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

HOME & GARDEN

Houseplant advice for the millennial (or anyone) who doesn't have a green thumb

BY KENNETH SETZER

Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden

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Dear millennial generation — those born from about the early 80s to late 90s — and those who know and love them:

I hear you like plants. This is really great news, because plants and a general appreciation of their importance are vital to our future. Can I offer you some plant-care tips and observations to help nurture your interest?

I am a bit concerned because many interests, if not properly cultivated (horticultural pun intended), can become short-lived fads if they lead to frustration, and I don't want you to give up on growing.

I'll start with the fiddle-leaf fig, *Ficus lyrata*. Figs are really cool plants with a slightly bad rep in South Florida in part because of overuse of *Ficus benjamina* hedges and their unwieldy roots and problems with whitefly and scale. But figs come in many, many shapes and sizes, and they make fine houseplants.

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The fiddle-leaf's violin-shaped leaves and reputation as a good houseplant seem to be what caused its initial appeal to, I am supposing, younger apartment dwellers.

But the fiddle-leaf seems to require bright, indirect light with some direct exposure to milder, early morning sun. These lighting conditions aren't always possible naturally. Too little light and they will lose leaves, too much direct sun and they burn. A covered patio with eastern exposure might suffice. Fiddle-leaf also suffers in too much A/C.

I'm told the fiddle-leaf trend is over, but nevertheless if you have one, don't give up on it and other *Ficus* species.

Also remember, few plants like wet feet. I've watered dry soil in potted plants, only to discover the plant's roots were sitting in water because the drainage was poor. So while the upper layer of soil was indeed dry, the roots were rotting in constantly saturated soil. Don't be afraid to remove the plant from its pot to check on things occasionally; you might save its life by repotting with fresh, well-draining soil.



Many Sedum plants need direct sun and rocky, fast-draining soil. Too much rain and compacted soil cause root rot.

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Cacti and succulents have been really popular for quite a while also. Many, like the succulent *Sedum*, remain small — great for dorms or small apartments and easily moved — yet they offer huge variety and don't require frequent watering.

Lighting can be a challenge. Please try to learn the name of your cactus or succulent and look it up online. If you have a plant that needs many hours of direct sun, like many cacti, this means the kind of sunlight in which you cast a dark shadow and should wear sunscreen.

If your plant is growing very tall and thin very rapidly, it may be starved for more direct sun and is seeking light. While a

cactus may look fine for a good long while in lower light, like on a windowsill, it will eventually suffer.

You love *Pilea peperomioides*, don't you? The Chinese money plant? Of course you do. It's supposedly often out of stock, a victim of its own popularity. This plant looks like it's got green quarters dangling from its stems, hence the money part. This one also needs good drainage, but keep it from totally drying out or the "quarters" will start to droop. When baby plants appear toward its base, you can cut them free and share with friends — save your money!

Remember as a kid seeing cuttings in a little vase of water? Lots of plants can be reproduced this way, and when they've sent out significant roots, can be gently planted and kept moist. You'll save money, get more plants, and learn patience waiting to see new growth. Choose a vessel with a narrow top to keep bugs out, and do not change the water if possible.



Cloning Plectranthus (Coleus) requires nothing more than a cutting, container and water.

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You can set the next trend yourself by looking at what your great grandmothers grew, like *Coleus* (now called *Plectranthus*) and begonias. They are easily reproduced as stem cuttings in water. There's even a begonia with an iron cross pattern on the leaves to match your tattoos, more accurately called *Begonia masoniana*. It's an understatement to say begonias vary, but it's generally safe to assume they prefer the same filtered, bright light as fiddle-leaf figs.

If you find houseplants are attracting gnats, it's likely because gnats inhabit the damp soil. Use a surface dressing like pebbles to thwart them. And don't fret about fertilizer. While houseplants will need it eventually, a general fertilizer used according to the label will work wonders. Don't overdo it.

Anyway, I'm really thrilled to learn that members of the younger generations like plants. Don't be afraid of killing them — sometimes that's how one learns. Don't always trust the plant names on the big box

store plants. Take a picture and look it up on your phone, or read a plant book. To learn more, visit a botanic garden, take a horticulture class and/or join a local plant society where you will learn incredible growing tips. And check out our wealth of free gardening info at <https://www.fairchildgarden.org/HomeGarden>.

With best wishes for your future growth,

Ken

Kenneth Setzer is writer and editor at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden.



Don't be afraid to examine roots. These need more room, but some plants like it this way. Kenneth Setzer - Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden