

Field diagnostic *cards*

- Most plant advice is folklore. We measure.

WHAT'S IN THE SET

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| 01 | Yellow leaves |
| 02 | Brown, crispy edges |
| 03 | Drooping |
| 04 | Pale, stretched growth |
| 05 | Brown or black spots |
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Six symptoms, every common cause that can produce them, and the one check that separates them. **Start with what you can see. Work down to the check. Don't act until you've done it.**

Yellow leaves

The most misread symptom in houseplants.

WHAT IT COULD BE

- **Too much water** — starts at the oldest, lowest leaves. The leaf feels soft and limp. Soil still damp two inches down.
- **Too little water** — yellow with dry, crisp edges. The leaf feels thin and papery. Soil dry two inches down.
- **Normal aging** — one leaf at a time, always the lowest one. Everything above it looks fine.
- **Short on nitrogen** — even, pale yellow across several older leaves, and new leaves coming in smaller than they should.
- **Too much direct sun** — patchy yellow, and only on the side facing the window.

THE CHECK

Push a finger two inches into the soil before you do anything else. Damp soil plus a soft leaf means too much water. Dry soil plus a crisp leaf means too little. If the soil reads right, count the yellow leaves — one is age, several is light or feeding.

Brown, crispy edges

Where the brown stops tells you what caused it.

WHAT IT COULD BE

- **Too little water** — the whole margin browns and the leaf curls inward. The leaf feels thin.
- **Dry air** — the tip only, ending in a sharp point, with the rest of the leaf still healthy.
- **Salt buildup** — brown rim plus a white or yellow crust on the soil surface and around the pot rim. Comes from fertilizer or hard tap water.
- **Roots out of room** — water runs straight through and out within seconds, and roots are visible at the drainage hole.
- **A sensitive species** — spider plant, dracaena, calathea and prayer plant brown at the tips from the fluoride and chlorine in tap water.

THE CHECK

Tip only, or the whole edge? Tip means air or water quality — try filtered or rainwater for a month. Whole edge plus a limp leaf means watering. Crust on the soil means flush the pot with about three times its volume of water. **Misting will not fix this.** It raises the humidity around a leaf for roughly ten minutes.

Drooping

Same symptom, opposite causes. Guess wrong and you lose the plant.

WHAT IT COULD BE

- **Too dry** — soil dry two inches down. Leaves limp but still flexible. Perks back up within hours of watering.
- **Root rot** — soil damp or soggy. Leaves limp *and* yellowing. Watering makes it worse. The soil may smell sour.
- **Temperature shock** — sitting near a vent, a radiator, an AC unit, or a door that opens to outside.
- **Recently repotted** — normal for one to two weeks. Keep it out of direct sun and don't feed it.
- **Rootbound** — dries out completely again within a day of every watering.

THE CHECK

Feel the soil before you reach for the watering can. Every time. A drooping plant in wet soil is drowning, and watering it again is the most common way houseplants die. If the soil is wet, slide the plant out of the pot and look: firm and pale roots are fine, brown and mushy roots are rot.

Pale, stretched growth

A plant reaching for light looks different from a hungry one.

WHAT IT COULD BE

- **Not enough light** — long bare stem between leaves, the whole plant leaning one way, new leaves smaller than the old ones.
- **Bright but never direct** — some plants want a few hours of actual sun. “Bright indirect” is not a universal rule, it's just the most repeated one.
- **Winter** — slower, paler growth from roughly November to February is normal. Don't try to correct it with fertilizer.
- **Short on nitrogen** — pale, but the spacing between leaves stays normal.

THE CHECK

Measure the gap between leaves on the newest growth and compare it against older growth. Longer gaps mean it needs light. Same gaps but pale means it needs feeding. A rough test for light: if you can't read a paperback comfortably where the plant sits, at midday, with no lamp on, it isn't bright enough for most foliage plants.

Brown or black spots

Does it spread? That is nearly the whole question.

WHAT IT COULD BE

- **Fungal leaf spot** — brown centre with a yellow ring around it. Spreads. Worse wherever leaves stay wet.
- **Bacterial spot** — dark and water-soaked looking, soft at the edge. Spreads fast.
- **Sunburn** — a bleached tan or white patch with a hard edge, only on leaves facing the window. Never spreads.
- **Cold damage** — large dark areas showing up a day or two after a cold night or a draft. Never spreads.
- **Too much water** — spots arriving alongside general yellowing and soft stems.

THE CHECK

Mark the date on one spotted leaf and look again in seven days. New spots on other leaves means something living — move that plant away from the others, take off the worst leaves, and keep water off the foliage. No change means physical damage. That leaf won't heal, but the plant is fine. Fix the light or the draft and leave it alone.

Something is on it

Five common ones, and how to tell them apart.

WHAT IT COULD BE

- **Spider mites** — fine webbing where leaf meets stem, and pale speckling across the leaf. Thrives in dry heat.
- **Mealybugs** — white cottony lumps tucked into the leaf joints.
- **Scale** — brown or tan bumps on stems and leaf undersides that don't move. Scrape one with a fingernail.
- **Thrips** — silvery streaks plus tiny black specks, and new leaves opening distorted.
- **Fungus gnats** — small flies drifting around the soil. Nearly harmless to the plant, but they mean the soil is staying wet too long.

THE CHECK

Hold a sheet of white paper under a leaf and tap the leaf hard. Specks that land and then walk are spider mites. Then check the undersides of the leaves — that is where nearly everything lives, and it is the place people never look. Isolate the plant before you treat it.

How to check the soil

Half the cards in this set end here. It is worth doing properly.

THE METHOD

- **Two inches down** — the top of the pot dries within hours. The root zone takes days. Surface dryness tells you almost nothing.
- **Learn the pot's weight** — lift it right after watering, then again when it is genuinely dry. The most reliable free method there is.
- **A wooden skewer works** — push it to the bottom, leave it a minute, pull it out. Damp and dark means still wet.
- **“Well-draining” has a definition** — water should leave the drainage hole within about thirty seconds. If it doesn't, the mix is holding water around the roots.
- **This is why schedules fail** — the same plant can want water every four days in July and every fourteen in January.

THE POINT

Not one card in this set tells you to follow a schedule. Every one of them tells you to check something first. Light, heat, humidity and season all move the number, and a calendar can't see any of them.