

THE PERFECT GIFT? TRY A HOUSEPLANT!

Maritta Perry Grau, Frederick County Master Gardener

Now that it's too cold to sit outside, social distancing with friends and extended family members (so hard when the Old Coach and I have one son and family across the street and one just two doors down!), how can we let them know we're thinking of them?

How about an easy-care houseplant or dish of succulents, assuming the family pets will leave said plants alone? The University of Maryland Extension Service (<https://extension.umd.edu/hgic/topics/selecting-indoor-plants>) has many recommendations. In case a potted plant or dish garden is on your mind, here are just a few that UMD recommends, from easy-care to finicky.

1. Don't have a green thumb? No problem. The UMD Extension Service calls the well-named **Snake plant** (*Sansevieria*) "the toughest plant on the planet." Well-named, indeed: I have had a small *Sansevieria* growing in a dish garden for about 10 years. For some reason, one of its blades has grown with a bend that reminds me of a cobra stretching up out of its basket. And tough, indeed: I once put a pot of *Sansevieria* on the sheltered front porch of our former home in Annapolis and left it there, totally neglected, all winter. It did not die.



Sansevieria Gardenista,
Author's picture

2. **Dracaena**, with colorful, striped or patterned foliage, usually darker green and chartreuse stripes or a purplish stripe, is a large, easy-care plant. Often, Dracaenas like a somewhat dry soil.



ZZ Plant
Photo courtesy of Plants.com

3. Another easy-care plant is the **ZZ**, or *Zamioculcas*. According to Wikipedia, "*Zamioculcas* is...in the family Araceae, containing the single species *Zamioculcas zamiifolia*. It is a tropical perennial plant native to eastern Africa, from southern Kenya to northeastern South Africa." The **ZZ plant** tolerates neglect, is drought-tolerant, and accepts low-light conditions. Its waxy, smooth leaves reflect sunlight and brighten rooms. ZZ usually grows slowly to about two to three feet, according to gardenista.com

4. If you're looking for color, *Dracaena*, mentioned above, and **Bromeliads** are good choices. Water bromeliads by pouring water into the "cup" formed by their leaves; they will tolerate low light for a long time, although they much prefer bright lights. So, if you want to brighten up a windowless room, such as a bathroom, you might rotate a Bromeliad with other low light-tolerant plants, giving them longer turns in bright-light rooms, and shorter times in darker rooms.

5. **Chinese Evergreen (*Aglaonema*)** has broad foliage, which grows from a central stem, is usually silver or gray-green, sometimes mottled with a mauve splotchiness or a mauve stripe, bringing some subtle color to the room it's in. The UMD extension service warns that "old plants develop tall stems [which] should be cut back to promote more compact growth."

6. Sometimes foliage plants, bought primarily for their shades of green, can surprise you. A dish garden I received in 2009 included a small **Hoya vine** with thick, leathery, pointed and speckled, dark green leaves. Although it's always been in the same brightly lit window, only this year did



Hoya Blossoms – Author's photo

with five-point centers and thick, leathery leaves.

it bloom—and did so several times—magnificent tight clusters of waxy, delicate, star-shaped pale pink flowers, each star with a second, smaller star on top, and a dark pink center that feathered into the pale pink. And even the tiny brown seed pods that were left when the Hoya finished blooming were pretty—I will spray some of them gold and use them with pinecones and other dried materials to decorate Christmas presents.

Hoya vine (*Hoya carnosa*) is also known as the "porcelain flower" or "wax plant." It prefers bright light to produce waxy clusters of star-shaped, white to pale pink flowers

7. **Succulents or cacti** are easy to grow, have many species in a huge variety of shapes, colors, and sizes, and host very few pest or disease problems. They generally do well in south-facing windows, especially if they have good drainage and the soil dries between waterings.



Succulents Amphitheatre – Author's photo

Edendome: The Eden Project, an educational charity in Cornwall, UK, comprises several geodesic domes to house one of the largest indoor rainforests in the world with different themes in each dome. The grounds of the seaside Minack Theatre, are filled with succulents from all over the world. Here, you can see a dinner plate-sized succulent next to the author's size 8 sneaker.



Tropical Eden – Author's photo A tropical rainforest plant grows inside one of the Eden Project's geodesic

Colin Skelly, horticulturist for the fabulous Eden Project in Cornwall, UK (<https://www.edenproject.com/eden-story>), notes that "...light and water...can have dramatic effects on a succulent's colour. In winter, they are quite green, but as light levels increase, coloured forms take on their darker tones. When stressed by lack of water, even green succulents take on red, pink and yellow tints. Often this is when they look most dazzling...one of the delights of growing succulents..."

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