

# Houseplant House Calls

Here is all you ever needed to know about houseplant problems

Story and Photography By Douglas A. Spilker

**Houseplants add beauty and interest to our homes. However, most houseplants are tropical plants that have been relocated to the harsher environment of the indoors. An unhealthy houseplant is often the result of improper conditions or care.** Factors such as too much or too little water, light, low humidity, or fertilizer can cause many plant problems, but so can insects and other pests.

## GET TO KNOW YOUR PLANT

Before you purchase a houseplant, consult the plant tag or other resources (including books and the internet) about that specific houseplant's growing requirements. Select a houseplant that will thrive best in the desired location. Plants stressed from poor growing conditions are more likely candidates for insects and other pests than ones growing vigorously.

Proper watering and fertilizing are important for a healthy plant. It is easy to overwater houseplants, which can result in poor root development. Pots should have proper drainage to allow the excess water to drain. Use soil-based potting soils, and avoid high peat potting soils, which may keep roots too wet thus promoting root rot. A white film on the soil surface or a white crust on the pot may indicate that the plant is being overfertilized or overwatered. Salt buildup in the soil can lead to root damage, causing symptoms such as stunted growth, deformed leaves, brown leaf tips, and plant wilting.

## PREVENTION AND DETECTION OF PESTS

The best way to control insects and other pests is through prevention. Before buying or bringing a plant indoors, always check it and

its container for signs of pests. Take the plant out of the pot to examine the soil, since pests may have entered through the drainage holes. Isolate new plants from plants already in the home for six weeks to ensure that any pest brought in will not spread. When repotting, use commercially prepared sterile potting soil rather than garden soil, which can be a source of pests.

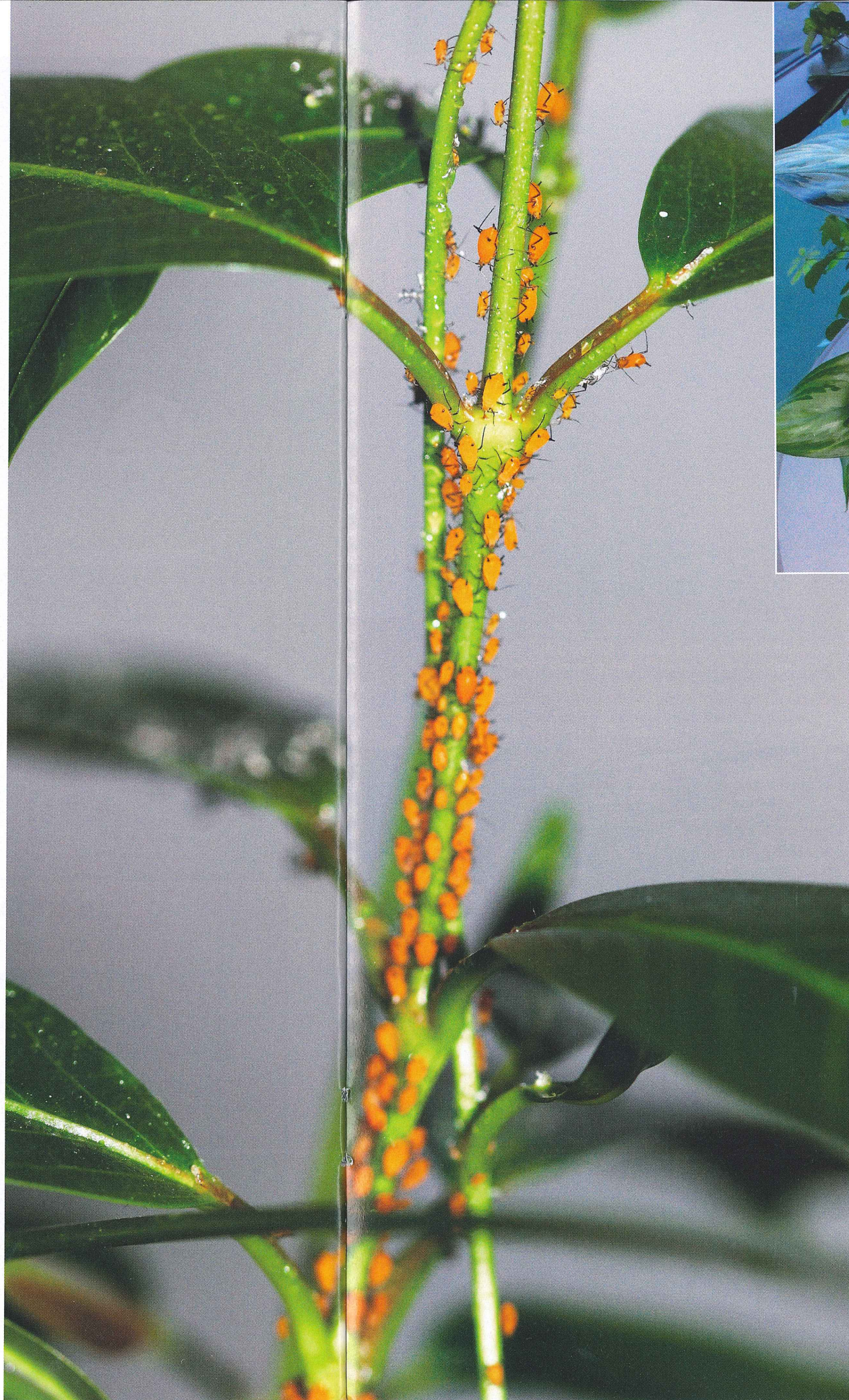
Since houseplant pests spread quickly, it is important to catch infestations early. Routine washing of smooth-leaved houseplants will help prevent dust buildup, which may harbor insects and spider mites. This is also an opportune time to look for any signs of trouble.

## SOLVING PEST PROBLEMS

If you discover a pest infestation, control strategies will depend on the kind of pest involved, the level of infestation and the value of the plant to you. Common pests include aphids, spider mites, fungus gnats, and mealybugs.

Aphids are small, soft-bodied insects usually found feeding on new growth. They suck plant sap, resulting in yellowing and deformed leaves. As aphids feed, they excrete a sugary, sticky material called honeydew. With minor infestations, the aphids can be wiped off with a soapy cloth or sprayed with insecticidal soap. To control a severe aphid infestation, there are numerous homeowner pesticides available, including ones applied to the soil for systemic uptake. Take plants outside to treat them.

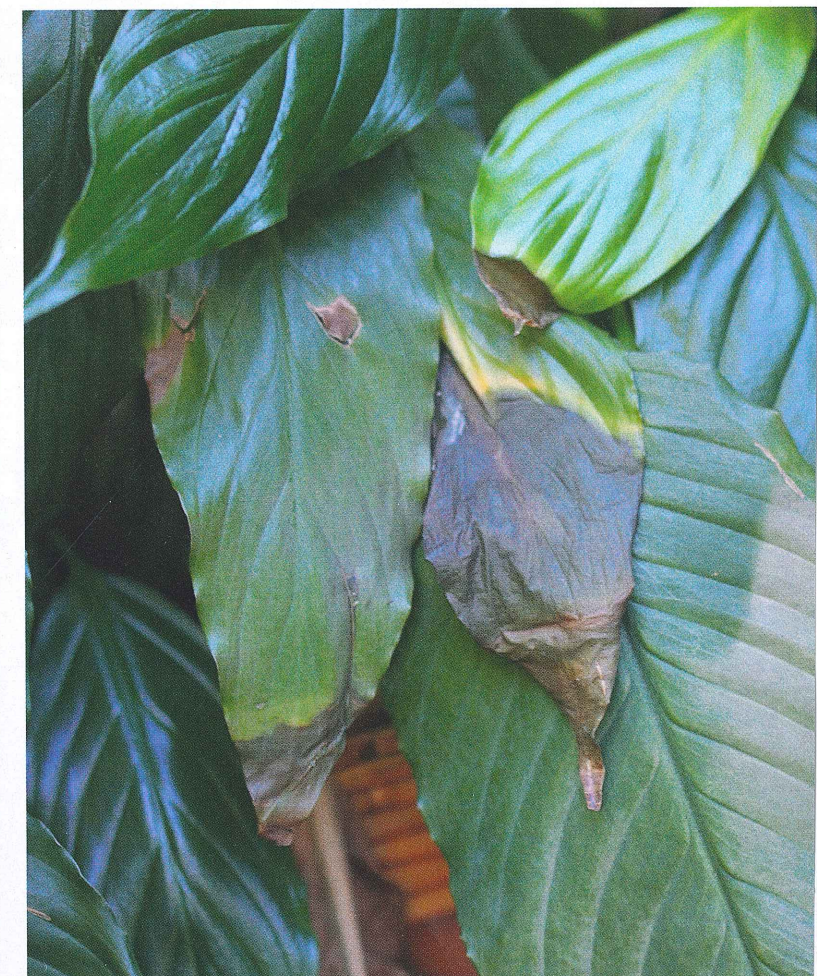
Spider mites are the most dreaded houseplant pest. These tiny pests spread quickly and are difficult to eliminate. Spider mites are not insects, but are related to spiders. Feeding first appears as light-colored leaf speckling progressing into an overall faded look to the plant. A silky web is seen with heavier infestations.



▲ Houseplants bring nature into our homes.

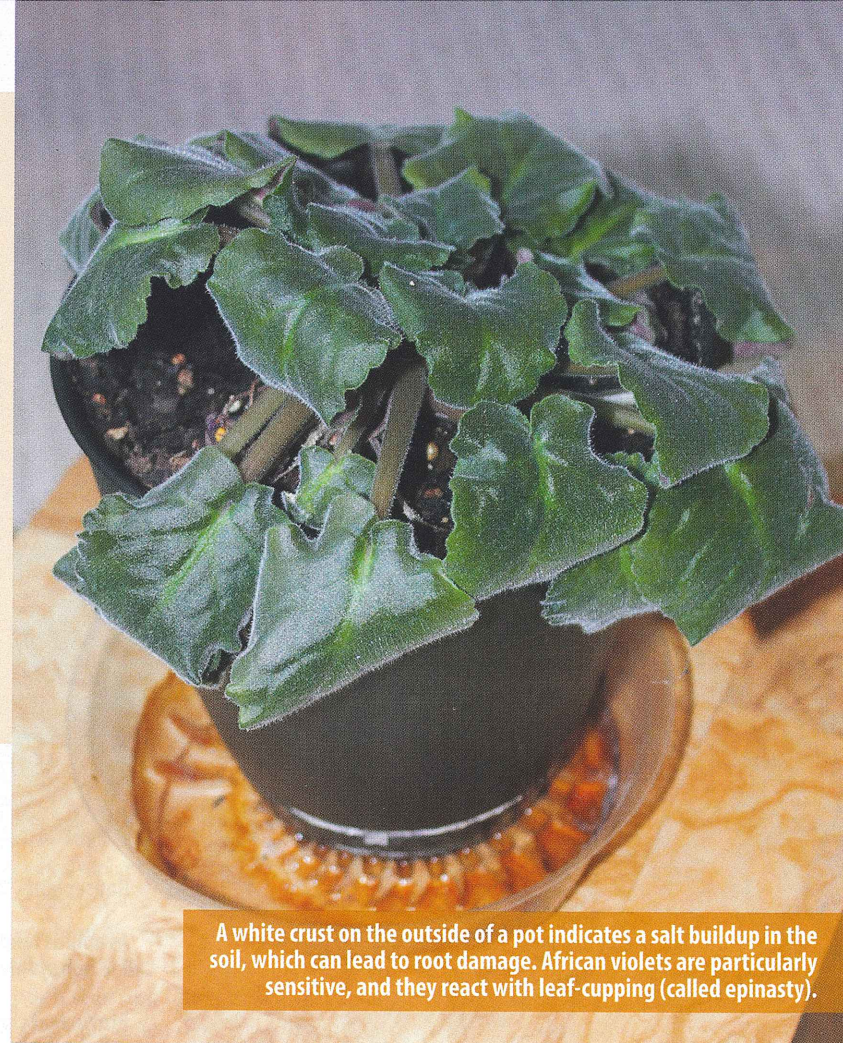
◀ As aphids feed, like on this *Mandevilla* sp., they excrete a sugary material called honeydew. Plant stickiness may be the first sign of an infestation.

▼ Brown leaf tips are seldom the result of a disease or pest problem. It usually indicates the plant has root problems, commonly caused by water-logged soil or salt buildup.



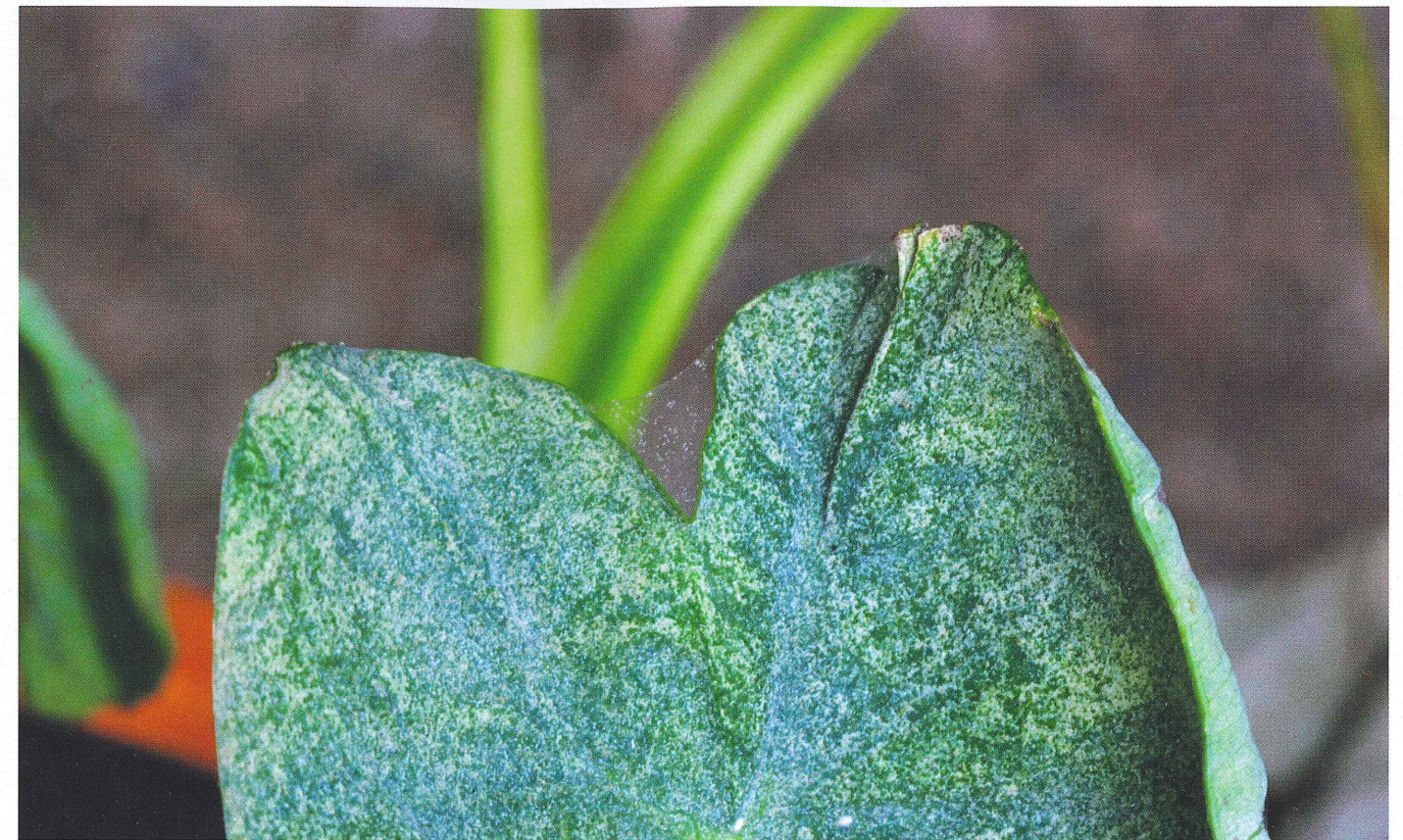
## Avoiding Mineral Buildup Problems

Soluble salts are minerals dissolved in water, either from the water source or dissolved fertilizer. Salts build up after the water evaporates. High salt content in the soil makes it harder for the roots to take up water and the roots may die. To avoid salt buildup, always water thoroughly and allow excess water to drain into the saucer, which then should be emptied. Thorough watering flushes the minerals out of the soil. Rainwater and condensate from a dehumidifier are good salt-free water sources. If using tap water, draw water for your plants the day before you plan to water, to allow the chlorine and minerals to settle out.



A white crust on the outside of a pot indicates a salt buildup in the soil, which can lead to root damage. African violets are particularly sensitive, and they react with leaf-cupping (called epinasty).

▼ Select houseplants that will thrive in your planned location. Healthy plants ward off pests and diseases much better than weaker ones. Study the plant tag for specific growing requirements.



▲ Leaf damage by spider mites starts as speckling, but it progresses to the leaves having a faded look. A silky web is often seen with heavier infestations.

Remove badly infected plant parts immediately, and hose the plant down outside to wash off some of the mites. Only a few homeowner products are available, commonly containing neem oil or insecticidal soap. Repeat applications are often necessary. If the whole plant is infested, consider discarding it to protect your other plants.

Fungus gnats can be a real aggravation, but rarely harm indoor plants. These delicate, gray flies hover around the home and are attracted to lights and windows.

The immature, white maggots live in very moist soil where they feed on decaying organic matter, and can be controlled by reducing soil moisture. Allow the soil surface to become dry between waterings. Remove any fallen plant material, and keep the soil less moist until they disappear. If this fails, an insecticide can be applied to the soil. The adult flies, although a nuisance, do not feed and can be controlled using an aerosol household spray.

It may be painful, but the simplest solution to a struggling houseplant may be to discard it and buy a new one. Some plants just never seem to adjust to their new location or recover from a pest problem.

### BUT DON'T GIVE UP

If you notice that your houseplants are not as healthy as you would like, do not give up. Work at improving their growing conditions, and see if they recover. Be vigilant for signs of any pests, and react before they can spread. Growing houseplants can be a struggle, but it is worth the effort to bring even a small measure of nature indoors. 🌿

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