



The Leaf Problem Decoder

Twelve common houseplant symptoms, what they mean, and what to do this week

By Jaci Brumble, M.S. Horticulture, horticulturist at Marie Selby Botanical Gardens. Find your plant's symptom below, check the likely cause, and try the fix. Most houseplant problems in Florida homes come down to water, light, air conditioning, or a pest you can beat if you catch it early. When in doubt, the last line of each entry tells you when it is time to get a professional look.

1. Leaves turning yellow all over

LIKELY CAUSE	Overwatering or a pot that cannot drain. In Florida homes this kills more houseplants than anything else.
DO THIS WEEK	Check the soil before you water, not the calendar. Let the top 1 to 2 inches dry out, make sure the pot has a real drainage hole, and empty the saucer after watering.
GET HELP IF	Yellowing spreads fast or the stem base feels soft.

2. Only the oldest, lowest leaves are yellow

LIKELY CAUSE	Often normal aging, sometimes a hungry plant moving nutrients to new growth.
DO THIS WEEK	Remove the spent leaves. If several go at once during the growing season, feed at half strength with a balanced houseplant fertilizer.
GET HELP IF	New growth is also pale or the whole plant looks faded.

3. Brown, crispy leaf tips

LIKELY CAUSE	Dry air from air conditioning, salts from tap water building up, or a watering routine that swings between soaked and bone dry.
DO THIS WEEK	Keep the plant away from AC vents, water on a consistent rhythm, and flush the pot with plain water until it runs freely out the bottom once a month.
GET HELP IF	Tips keep browning after a month of consistent care.

4. Wilting even though the soil is wet

LIKELY CAUSE	Drowning roots. A wilted plant in wet soil is not thirsty; the roots cannot breathe and may be rotting.
DO THIS WEEK	Stop watering. Slide the plant out and look: healthy roots are firm and light colored, rotten ones are brown and mushy. Trim the mush, repot in fresh fast-draining mix.
GET HELP IF	Most of the root ball is brown, smelly, or slimy.

5. Wilting with bone-dry soil

LIKELY CAUSE	Underwatering, or a rootbound plant whose soil sheds water instead of soaking it in.
DO THIS WEEK	Set the pot in a few inches of water for 20 to 30 minutes so the root ball rehydrates from below. If roots circle the pot or poke out the holes, repot one size up.
GET HELP IF	The plant does not perk up within a day of a good soak.

6. White cottony fuzz on stems and leaf joints

LIKELY CAUSE	Mealybugs. They hide where leaves meet stems and spread to neighboring plants.
DO THIS WEEK	Isolate the plant. Dab the fuzz with a cotton swab of 70 percent isopropyl alcohol, then treat the whole plant with insecticidal soap weekly for three to four weeks.
GET HELP IF	Fuzz keeps returning or has reached several plants.

7. Fine webbing and tiny speckles on leaves

LIKELY CAUSE	Spider mites. They thrive in the dry air of air-conditioned rooms and multiply quickly.
DO THIS WEEK	Shower the whole plant, undersides included. Treat weekly with insecticidal soap or horticultural oil for three to four weeks and raise humidity around the plant.
GET HELP IF	Leaves are bronzing or dropping despite treatment.

8. Tiny black flies drifting around the soil

LIKELY CAUSE	Fungus gnats. The adults are harmless but annoying; the larvae live in constantly moist soil.
DO THIS WEEK	Let the top inch or two of soil dry out between waterings, add yellow sticky traps, and water from below for a few weeks. Mosquito bits with BTI in the watering can help.
GET HELP IF	Gnats persist after a month of drier soil.

9. Sticky film on leaves or the floor below

LIKELY CAUSE	Honeydew, the residue left by sap-sucking insects such as scale, aphids, or mealybugs.
DO THIS WEEK	Find the insect first. Look for small brown bumps (scale) or clusters on new growth (aphids). Wipe leaves clean and treat with horticultural oil weekly.
GET HELP IF	You cannot find the pest or the sticky film returns.

10. Pale, washed-out leaves and stretched, leggy growth

LIKELY CAUSE	Not enough light. The plant is reaching for a window and running out of fuel.
DO THIS WEEK	Move it closer to a bright window, rotate a quarter turn each week, and rinse dust off the leaves so they can use the light they get.
GET HELP IF	No improvement in four to six weeks, or you have no brighter spot to offer.

11. Bleached or scorched patches on leaves

LIKELY CAUSE	Sunburn. Direct Florida afternoon sun through a west or south window is stronger than most houseplants can take.
DO THIS WEEK	Move the plant back from the glass or filter the light with a sheer curtain. Burned patches will not heal; trim badly damaged leaves once new growth appears.
GET HELP IF	Damage keeps appearing after the move.

12. Leaves dropping suddenly after a move or a trip

LIKELY CAUSE	Shock from a sudden change: new light, new temperature, a draft, or a dried-out root ball while you were away.
DO THIS WEEK	Do not repot or fertilize a stressed plant. Put it in bright, indirect light, water properly once, and leave it alone for two to three weeks to adjust.
GET HELP IF	Dropping continues past three weeks or the stems shrivel.

Still stumped?

Some problems need eyes on the plant. A health diagnosis visit is a flat \$185 anywhere from Sarasota to Port Charlotte, and a \$65 virtual consult works from photos. Call (941) 451-7413 or book at <https://evergreenhouseplantcare.com>. I will tell you honestly whether your plant can be saved and exactly what to do.

Care guidance is general; your plant's conditions matter. Nothing here replaces an in-person diagnosis for a rapidly declining plant.