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# How to Care for Calathea Plants



Varieties of Calathea plant leaves.

Photo Credit: L.M.photo

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# Growing and Propagating Calathea Indoors

By [Christopher Burnett](#)

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Calathea offers unrivaled foliage painted with varied patterns of pastel greens, creams, reds, and purples. They require low light, so their colorful leaves brighten any room. However, this is not a “beginner” houseplant, and it’s essential to know how to care for calathea.

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Plants of the genus *Calathea* are native to the rainforests of South America. They only grow in USDA Hardiness Zones 11 and 12, so they are treated houseplants and not planted in the ground. While they flower in the native rainforest, it's very rare for calathea to flower indoors. However, their painted foliage is very attractive on its own!

Calathea resembles closely related species in the genus *Maranta* (known as the prayer plant). To add confusion, many popular houseplant varieties once classified as *Calathea* are now considered part of *Goeppertia*. Ultimately, all these houseplants plants have similar care requirements, regardless of their official names, so don't place too much importance on labels!



Rattlesnake plant (*Calathea lancifolia*) with striking wavy leaves with brush-stroke patterns resembling reptile skin.  
Credit: TanakDusun

plant collectors. They will grow in low-light rooms, which is a bonus. Plus, they are non-toxic to pets. However, their demanding humidity and watering preferences may make them a challenge to a beginner houseplant keeper. Paying attention to its houseplant care needs is essential, hence this plant guide!

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## GROWING

Calathea is a long-lived plant, assuming you provide the correct light, water, humidity, and temperature.

**Difficulty level:** Moderate, due to watering and humidity requirements.

## Water

Calathea thrive when their potting mix is kept consistently moist but not saturated wet. This can be a tricky balance to strike, so don't be

highly recommended. Use the moisture meter to test the potting mix before watering; the mix should not be allowed to fully dry out between waterings, but it should also not remain waterlogged.

## Light

Adapted to grow in the rainforest understory, calathea tolerate low light conditions.

However, they look their perkiest and most colorful when kept in bright, indirect light. Keep them away from fully exposed south-facing windows, as the intense sunlight can burn their leaves and dry their soil out too quickly. If possible, place calathea in an east-facing window where they will receive morning sunlight or in a west- or south-facing window that's covered with a sheer curtain to diffuse the sunlight. A north-facing window is also a fine option, although plants may benefit from supplemental artificial light in the form of a full-spectrum LED.

## Humidity

Although calathea may tolerate moderate levels of humidity (40–60%) for a period, they do best with high humidity (>60%) long term.

Use a humidifier to achieve appropriate hu-

unfortunately.) Keep calathea away from particularly dry areas as well, such as near air vents or fireplaces. A bathroom windowsill makes for the perfect calathea perch.

## Temperature

Being warm-weather plants, calathea do not grow well in temperatures below 60°F and may even start to lose their leaves and die back if kept too cold. For this reason, keep them away from frigid windows in the winter.

## Fertilizer

Calathea are not very demanding when it comes to fertilizer. When they're actively growing—typically in the spring and summer months—apply a balanced fertilizer every 2–3 weeks. At other times, apply fertilizer once a month at the most, as calathea are susceptible to root burn from overfertilization.

## Toxicity

Calathea are considered non-toxic to humans and pets.

## Types

Options abound in the world of calathea! There are many varieties available at nurs-

ences, you will likely be able to find a calathea that catches your eye and matches your style.

- Rattlesnake plant, *Goeppertia insignis* (syn. *Calathea lancifolia*): This popular variety sports narrow, light-green leaves adorned with dark-green spots and reddish-purple undersides. The long and slender leaves have slightly wavy edges—an overall look that is whimsical but modern.
- *Goeppertia orbifolia* (syn. *Calathea orbifolia*): These elegant plants have large, wide, rounded leaves that are a pale, silvery green veined by darker green stripes.
- Peacock plant, *Goeppertia makoyana* (syn. *Calathea makoyana*): Another popular variety, the peacock plant (also known as “cathedral windows”) has oval leaves that end in a gentle point. The leaves are pale green with darker green edges and spots, and have reddish-purple undersides.



Peacock plant (*Calathea makoyana*).

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## PESTS/DISEASES

**Pests and Diseases:** Calathea plants are susceptible to many common houseplant pests. Scrutinize the plant and wipe the leaves gently with a damp cloth or mist insecticidal soap and water. [Learn more about calathea pest control.](#)

- [scale](#),
- [thrips](#),
- [fungus gnats](#)
- [mealybugs](#)

## How to Save a Dying Calathea

humidity preferences. If your calathea is suffering, here's how to diagnose and save your houseplant:

- **Yellowing leaves:** This is often a watering issue. Insert your finger about an inch into the soil—the top 1 to 2 inches should feel dry before you water again. Make sure your pot has drainage holes. If root rot has already set in, trim away the damaged roots and repot in more porous, less compacted soil that drains quickly.
- **Leaf curling or drooping, brown and crispy leaf tips:** Usually, there is a lack of humidity. This rainforest plant loves humidity and absorbs moisture through specialized cells in its leaves. Solutions: Get a humidifier, mist the leaves regularly, place them on a tray filled with water and pebbles, and group them with other plants. Do not over-mist; we don't want mold!
- **Unsightly brown splotches spots:** Too much direct sunlight. Move the plant to indirect sunlight or use shades or sheer curtains. It's ok to trim brown tips or edges but also address the problem or it will continue.

- **Wilting or drooping leaves:** The plant needs a brighter location. Remember, this houseplant should be placed in bright, *indirect* sunlight. Consider an LED light if your living space doesn't have enough light.
- **Browning or yellow leaf tips or margins** indicate over-fertilization. Flush the soil with water. Halt fertilizing and then follow the recommended dosage on the fertilizing bag.

## Potting and Repotting

**Soil:** As with most houseplants, calathea do best in a well-draining potting mix. If you make your own potting mix, consider amending it with vermiculite and coco coir, which will help it retain moisture and also prevent compaction. Calathea do not like to dry out entirely, and compacted soil does not absorb or hold onto moisture well.

**Pot size/type:** With their preference for being kept on the more well-watered side, calathea will do best in a pot that holds onto more moisture than not. Choose plastic or glazed terra cotta over unglazed clay pots, which dry out too quickly.

If your calathea is getting big or you want to expand your collection, you start a new plant! Calathea can't be propagated by cuttings but by division. These are clumping plants, and there are usually several clumps. Divide when you repot in springtime.

The day prior, thoroughly water your plant to reduce transplant stress. Choose new pots with drainage holes and fill them in advance with potting soil, which is 2 parts coco coir to 1 part perlite. Tip: Put a coffee filter at the bottom of each pot to keep soil from falling through.

Gently loosen the mother plant from its container and tease apart separate clumps of rhizomes, which look like small bulbs. Be sure to brush off old soil and trim away any damaged plant sections. You may have to cut some smaller roots to separate the rhizomes from one another, but as long as each rhizome still retains **some roots and at least one stem and leaf**, they will spring back to life once repotted.

After planting in new pots, backfill with potting soil. Water thoroughly, allowing water to drain through. Keep your new potted plants



When propagating calathea, divide the plant into sections (do not remove the rhizomes which store the water!). Credit: Clksy30

## Seasonal Care

As calathea tolerate neither cold temperatures nor intense sunlight, they are best kept as indoor plants year-round.

## WIT AND WISDOM

Like their cousin *Maranta leuconeura*, aka the prayer plant, calathea experiences **nyctinasty**, the opening and closing of leaves in response to light. At night, calathea pull their leaves inward and upward, as if in prayer, to collect the dew that settles on their leaves. In the morning, their leaves relax downward and spread outward again to take full advantage of the sunlight.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Christopher Burnett



Chris is an avid gardener, maintaining a small vegetable garden for himself and his family, a variety of ornamental flowers and shrubs, and a diverse collection of houseplants. [Read More from Christopher Burnett](#)

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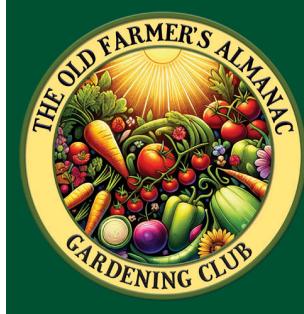
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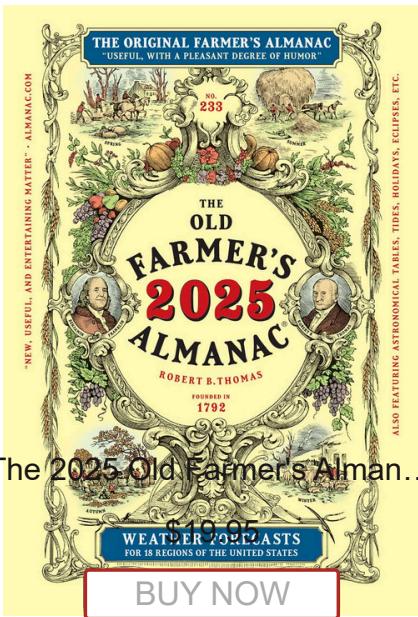
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