

How to not kill your dorm plants

By Charlie Taylor, Culture Editor

Plants were meant to be in the great outdoors, not some stuffy dorm room — but if you're looking for a companion, a new hobby or even just a little greenery for your room, a low-maintenance house plant can be a great option.

Drew Clouse has worked at City Grows — an organic garden shop in Pittsburgh's Lawrenceville neighborhood that caters to people living in small spaces — for five years and is currently the shop's social media manager. A 2013 Pitt grad, they know first-year dorms like Litchfield Towers don't always provide ideal living conditions for house plants. Still, they said the right plant with the right care can not only thrive in a dorm room, but help its owner thrive as well.

"You can have something to take care of and something outside of schoolwork that you can be like, 'Here's this thing I need to make sure I'm on top of,'" Clouse said.

Choose the right plant

Not every plant is well-suited for college life. Clouse recommends snake plants, ZZ plants and pothos because they require minimal sunlight and watering. They said owners should only water them every week and a half to every few weeks, which means these plants will last long enough without water for you to go home on breaks and not worry about them.

"If you water them right before [winter] break and then get them when you come back, they should be pretty okay," Clouse said. "Pothos need a little more water, but they can definitely bounce back."

If you have some experience and are open to more of a commitment, Clouse suggests ferns, air plants and calatheas, but cautioned that those plants sometimes pose a challenge for beginners.

"They need a bit more upkeep, so depending on the person, I don't know if I'd immediately recommend them," Clouse said.

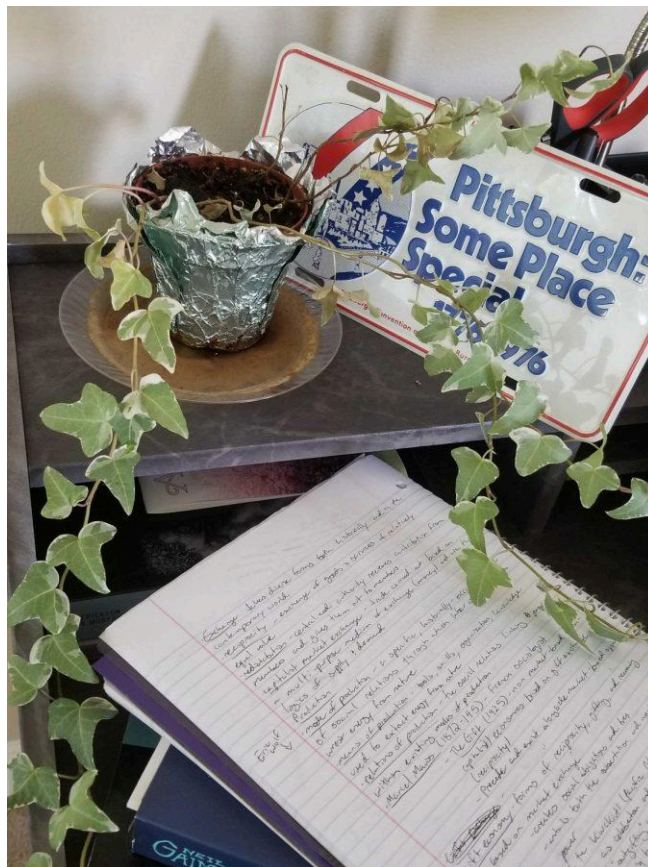
No sun? No problem

According to Clouse, each of the plants they recommended can thrive in indirect sunlight, which is essential for plants kept in a room with one small window. Since they don't need sunny conditions, they can easily stay on a shelf or nightstand — as long as they still get some light.

"Pretty much all of them you can stick wherever in a dorm," Clouse said. "Obviously, the closer to the window in general the better, but they don't need to be directly on the windowsill."

Although succulents may look cute and don't require frequent watering to stay alive, Clouse warned against purchasing one for a dorm. Because desert plants need direct sunlight, rooms with one small window tend to be too dim to support them.

"You can theoretically get away with that in a dorm, but it really depends on the dorm room and how much light you get in through the window," Clouse said. "You need a really bright window."



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A house plant sits on a college student's desk.

Recognize its needs

Nobody's a perfect plant parent — sometimes we overwater or underwater and end up with plants that look a little worse for wear. Clouse said owners can generally tell what they're doing wrong by how the leaves look. Yellowing leaves usually indicate the plant is getting too much water, while browning, crispy leaves indicate it's getting too little.

Clouse also said every plant is different, and to really know what it needs requires research. When your snake plant or fern seems a little off, they said Google is often the way to go.

"A lot of [learning upkeep] is doing research online, because some plants show different symptoms depending on what's wrong," Clouse said.