

Periodically remove the dust from plant leaves, so the plants can breathe. Clean many plants quickly by putting them under the bathroom shower if you have unsoftened water. Use a gentle lukewarm sprinkle. To avoid washing soil out of the pot, wrap a plastic sheet around the base of the plant and over the pot. After their shower, let the plants drip a while before taking them back to where they belong. If chemical residue in the water makes white spots, remove them with a clean, soft cloth.

Large-leaved plants can be easily cleaned by wiping the leaves with a damp cloth. Support the underside of the leaf with one hand while gently wiping the upper side with the cloth.

To remove dust from hairy-leaved plants, such as African violets and gloxinias, rub gently with a dry cotton swab or pipe cleaner. A watercolor brush works well for this job, too.

A little judicious trimming will keep your plants the size you want. Without pruning and pinching, a plant can become tall and leggy.

Pinching off the tip growth of a branch encourages side branches to develop and results in a thicker, bushier plant. No tools are necessary for this simple operation; just use your thumb and index finger. New branches generally arise from buds at the bases of the remaining leaves.

Pinching improves the shape of branching plants, such as wax begonias and coleus. Single-leader plants, such as dieffenbachia, rubber tree, and dracena, shouldn't be pinched.

Often a major branch must be removed, either to keep the plant the size you want or to improve its shape. Study the plant carefully before cutting off all or part of a major branch. Use clippers to get a smooth cut, and make the cut just above a bud. The best times to prune a plant are when it is actively growing (usually in the spring) or soon after it has bloomed.