

Spider Plants

by Sydney J. Tanner, Chippewa Valley Master Gardener Volunteer

Many years ago, my friend gave me a bunch of “babies” from her spider plant. Up until that time, the only house plants that I had been able to keep alive were violets, cacti, and succulents. She told me to “just stick them in some soil and they’ll take root and grow.” Since then, I’ve had various sizes of spider plants growing in pots at my house. The original plant I named Henrietta. She still sits by my kitchen sink and at present has had several “arms of babies” of her own.

Spider plants (*Chlorophytum comosum*) are members of the large Asparagaceae Family. They are related to hyacinths and agaves (well, and asparagus). There are more than 200 species of *Chlorophytum*. Within the species there are dozens of varieties of each. Other names for this particular plant include airplane plant and spider ivy. Since the leaves look a bit like lily leaves, I’ve heard spider plants called spider lilies... but they are totally different plants and are not related.

As house plants go, spider plants are considered extremely easy to grow and take care of. They make for a lovely natural hanging or basket plant, and have been used as such for almost 175 years. In fact, it’s one of the most popular houseplants in the world. The plant is a native of tropical to southern Africa. Because it is native to tropical zones, spider plants may be used as bedding plants outside or as a ground cover in very mild climates.

Spider plants are considered a perennial, evergreen herb. They grow to about two feet in height. Spider plant roots are tuberous. Graceful, long (up to 18 inches), linear leaves emerge from a dense, basal rosette and arch outward. Spider plant leaves have a mid-vein and are channeled.

When a spider plant is mature, it flowers in the summer time. The flowers are stellate (star-shaped) and white. They are small $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch across. They bloom along a thin, long peduncle that grows out of the center of the spider plant. The peduncle can be green, yellow, or white depending on the variety of spider plant.

How to take care of the plant? Here are a few tips. Spider plants like a well-drained, slightly acidic, sandy loam soil (pH 6.1 to 6.5). If you ever feel you need or have to “fertilize” your spider plant, just water it a few times with diluted coffee instead of its normal watering. Spider plants like diffused light or partial shade. Direct, hot sunlight can burn the tips and edges of the leaves so they turn brown.

Water spider plants when the soil feels dry to the touch. You do not have to water the plant every day. Once a week, to once every ten days should be fine. Do not leave your spider plants in standing water. Spider plants do not like wet feet (roots) and root rot will set in. Spider plants can stand a variety of temperatures, but like it best between 70- and 90-degrees F. If the temperature gets “chilly” (below 50 degrees F), your spider plant will not thrive.

Plantlets, offsets, or spiderlettes (what my friend called “babies”) form along the peduncle, where ever there was a flower. The peduncle can have more than one branch, called scapes. Spider plants are different from other plants in that the spiderlettes are actually fully-formed crown heads, with tiny roots and leaves. These can be separated from the stem and planted on their own. Some gardeners prefer to put the little roots in some water for a week or two to stimulate growth. It’s not really necessary. If the spiderlettes are planted in moist soil, they should grow just fine. There are other methods of

propagation for spider plants. Dividing a “stand” of spider plant is one of them. Make sure the roots are included in the dividing. Dividing and repotting should only be done when the plant’s roots are trying to come out of the pot. I find this happens in the spring. Spider plants also actually produce seed. Sow the seeds about ½ inch deep in good potting soil. Germination can take up to 3½ weeks.

Plant problems include root rot from over watering and leaf browning from too much sun or light that is too intense. Pests that bother spider plants include spider mites (which technically is kind of funny, but not), aphids, mealy bugs, and white flies. If you have problems, start by giving your spider plant a shower to clean the pests off. If the problem persists, I’d suggest an organic, home safe pesticide.

Good companion plants to grow with (even in the same pot) spider plants include ferns, ZZ plants (*Zamioculcas zamiifolia*), and Dracaenas (which are cousins to the spider plant). It’s also nice to note that spider plants are safe to grow around children and pets.

Spider plants have amazing air filtering properties. Testing done by NASA specialists has proven that spider plants (along with other plants) take poisonous/dangerous gasses and chemicals out of the air when they “breathe.” Extremely simplified version: Carbon dioxide in (along with whatever else is in the air), and oxygen (clean) comes out. Sunlight helps the plant convert carbon dioxide and water into carbohydrates and oxygen. Spider plants are especially known for removing formaldehyde, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, and ethylbenzene from the air. Some NASA scientists advise having a spider plant in the kitchen, one by your computer, and one in the bathroom.

Along with cleaning the air in the home, spider plants (and house plants in general) have other benefits. Having plants around reduces stress, helps improve mood, and increases creativity. When I asked my husband what he thought of houseplants, he said, “They give cats something to chew on when they’ve a mind to, which makes the plants look sickly and gives you something to diagnose. They also give dogs something to knock over and cause you extra work. In other words, plants can provide you both with something to do and with exercise, thus making them very healthful to have around.”