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# IN THE GARDEN WITH MR. GREENJEANS

by Randy Arnowitz



Randy – Mr. Greenjeans – resides in a potting shed with 200 orchids and his golden retriever “Peaches.” He enthusiastically welcomes your gardening questions; address them to greenjeansmr@verizon.net.

## Sudden Leaf Drop Syndrome

Dear Mr. Greenjeans,

No matter what I do, the ficus tree in my living room always loses its leaves. I try to water it once a week but it still sheds more leaves than it grows. At this rate I will soon have a bunch of sticks. Help!

Signed,  
**Bare by the Biltmore**

Dear Bare,

There are really only two reasons to keep a ficus tree (*Ficus benjamina*) indoors in Santa Barbara: 1) you enjoy fall color, or 2) you like to vacuum.

Only kidding. There’s really nothing like a lush, shiny-leafed ficus to soften a stark office or to bring a little bit of nature into your living room, but sometimes growing a ficus tree indoors can be tricky; at least initially. However, once you get the rhythm down, it is possible to keep one thriving indoors for many years.

Your tree will do best in a *bright* room with *consistent* watering. This means keeping the soil evenly moist. Don’t water when it’s already soggy but don’t let the roots dry out either. Occasionally take the plant outside or into the shower and thoroughly run water through the thing until water comes out the bottom of the pot. This helps to flush out the accumulated salts from the soil.

Sudden Leaf Drop Syndrome or SLDS is often due to relocating your ficus from one exposure to another. This can often be as subtle as a move from one room to another.

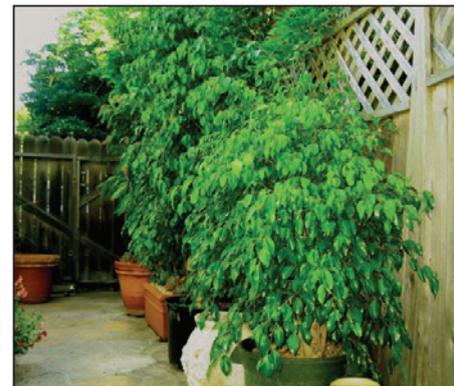
Lack of humidity in your home may also cause leaf drop, especially in the winter when you crank up the heat and dry out the air.

If your ficus tree drops its leaves immediately after you bring it home, it could be that it was grown in a much brighter, more humid environment, like a commercial greenhouse and it will have to adapt to the dimmer, drier conditions.

If your ficus does drop its leaves, do not automatically give it more water. Just wait a bit and soon it will replace them with new ones that should be able to get by in the new exposure.

For some reason, when grown outdoors, ficus trees are more forgiving of temperature, humidity, and watering fluctuations, and are one of the easiest plants to grow in containers.

Since I’m from New Jersey where the state houseplant is a spider plant, it’s



Mr. Greenjeans says that although ficus trees *can* do well indoors, they absolutely thrive outdoors

still a novelty to grow the ubiquitous ficus tree on my patio. What does all this have to do with them dropping their leaves? Not much, except to say that since they are effortless to grow outside and sometimes too fussy to grow inside, you might try a dracaena, a kentia or a rubber tree in your living room instead.

Dear Mr. Greenjeans,

Here’s one for you. This season, some of my rose bushes, especially the ones along our brick pathway, have strange stunted and misshapen leaves. They look like finely cut, curly, maple-leaf shaped leaves. Also, a few have canes that are completely dying back. What the heck is going on?

Signed,  
**Confounded in Carp**

Dear Confounded,

Here’s a question for you. Have you recently sprayed out the weeds in your brick pathway? Because, you have described the classic symptoms of herbicide damage. Even the slightest amount of spray drift from a systemic broad-spectrum herbicide like Roundup can cause damage on your roses. I am talking about the *most minute* amount of Roundup; in fact if you even *say* the “R word” within earshot of your rose garden, damage may occur.

Symptoms may appear as deformed, spiky, cupped, sclerotic, curled, alien-like leaf growth. Cane dieback and the loss of the entire bush can also occur depending on how much herbicide the plant has been exposed to.

If you must use herbicides, always use a different spray canister for them than you use for the (earth friendly) products you spray on your roses. Even after rinsing and re-rinsing, the residue left in a sprayer from Roundup can still affect your roses, and not in a good way.

My