It always amazes me how some people have a naturally green thumb. My mother-in-law is one of these people. A couple of weeks ago, I was at her house in South Carolina and could not help but be envious of her houseplant collection. If you visit my home, there are NO houseplants. If you visit my office, there are NO houseplants. I cannot keep a houseplant alive. Houseplants are tricky. There are many factors that go into caring for a healthy houseplant. Water, light, fertilization, and container size are the four main limiting factors for houseplants. I usually manage to mess up one or more of these whether it is too much or too little. In my case, it is most often too little, too late. I used to have cuttings from a wandering jew, *Tredescantia zebrina*, in my windowsill behind my desk. After the third or fourth time of reviving them from the brink of death, I decided to leave it to the experts. I know, you are probably laughing right now. I paid a lot of money for my education to be that expert, but that does not always mean I remember to do all the things that I know I should! So for the sake of all those people out there like me, keep reading for the four keys to healthy houseplants.

Water is the number one killer of all houseplants, and contrary to popular belief it is too much water that most often kills houseplants. The majority of houseplants should be allowed to dry out in between waterings. This does not mean wait weeks for the soil to get crusty and start pulling away from the edges of the pot. Use your index finger as a moisture sensor. If the soil in the pot is damp at a depth of approximately one inch, the plant does not need watering. If it is dry, water away. Make sure that when you water, there is a drain in the bottom of the pot. If there is no drain hole, the water will pool at the bottom of the pot, and the plant’s root system will begin to decay quite rapidly. Consistently moist soil is also an invitation for fungus gnats.

Light requirements for houseplants are very important. From direct light to low filtered light, there are many different light requirements for houseplants. Make sure that you select the right plant for the right place in your house. If you do not have much light try a snake plant, *Sansevieria trifasciata*. For direct sun areas, you may have better luck than I did with the wandering jew.
Fertilization is crucial to plant health. With limited root systems and space, houseplants need fertilization to ensure they have access to vital plant nutrients. Check the label on your plant for specific requirements. Fertilizer can be added easily through potting soil, water-soluble additives, fertilizer stakes, and/or pelletized fertilizer.

The last and most often forgotten key to houseplant health is container size. Houseplants can live for years and just like the foliage of the plant is getting bigger, so is the root system. Check the root system on your plants every couple of months. When removed from the pot, if roots are seen circling the outside edge it is time to move to a larger container. Loosen the circling roots and replant into a larger container with plenty of room to expand.

I hope that these four keys to healthy houseplants will help you on your way to houseplant glory. Now if only I could remember to turn around, once in a while and water mine!

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me, Kerrie Roach, horticultural Extension agent, at North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center, at (910) 671-3276 or by e-mail at Kerrie_Roach@ncsu.edu or visit North Carolina Cooperative Extension, Robeson County Center’s website at Robeson.ces.ncsu.edu.