Decide Which Three Plants to Try Next

A practical shortlist worksheet



Swedish ivy, shown as one example, not a shortlist recommendation.

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A useful shortlist begins with the space and attention you can offer. Three plants are enough to explore different interests without turning every spare surface into a new obligation. They need not be bought together, and the best final decision may be to start with only one.

This guide helps you choose a small set of plant experiments and define what you want to learn. It is not a universal list of the three easiest plants. Your light, climate, household, budget and existing collection make the decision specific to you.

Describe the available places before browsing plants

Choose the actual positions you could use. For each, record the observed light pattern, temperature concerns, exposure to wind or rain if outdoors and practical access for care. Note seasonal changes you already know about and uncertainties you still need to check.

The RHS advises matching houseplants to the conditions of their location, including light, humidity and temperature. Conditions can differ within one home and across the year. A plant's appearance in a shop does not establish that it suits your shelf. RHS, Choosing the Best Houseplants

Be concrete about capacity. Measure the space available for the mature plant, not just its nursery pot. Check that the pot will be stable and accessible without blocking a door or reaching over an edge. Include drainage arrangements and where a new arrival can be inspected apart from the existing collection.

For indoor candidates, do not interpret “easy care” as “needs no light.” The RHS explicitly notes that even tolerant houseplants cannot live in complete darkness. If the intended position lacks suitable growing light, resolve that limitation before selecting a plant. RHS, Easy-Care Houseplants

Set the limits you will actually respect

Write a total budget that includes necessary pots, appropriate medium and other essentials, not only the plant price. Keep each candidate's cost beside the combined cost of the plants you would actually acquire. Count genuinely shared supplies once, but do not assume one existing pot or one remaining portion of medium can serve all three at the same time. Decide how much additional care you can reasonably manage and when you will be away.

List household constraints: children, pets, people who may handle the plants, shared surfaces and any relevant building rules. Check candidate identities and safety information with appropriate reliable sources. Do not assume that a common name uniquely identifies a safe plant.

For outdoor candidates, check local suitability, invasive-species guidance and any restrictions before acquiring them. A plant described as native or beneficial elsewhere is not automatically appropriate in your region. Obtain nursery-propagated stock from a reputable source rather than collecting plants from the wild.

These checks are gates, not scoring opportunities. A low price or attractive flower cannot compensate for an unresolved safety issue or a growing condition you cannot provide.

Choose three learning roles

Give each potential place in the shortlist a purpose. One practical arrangement is:

- **A familiar-condition plant:** a candidate whose needs resemble a plant or growing situation you already manage successfully.

- **A modest stretch:** a candidate requiring one new skill you are willing and equipped to learn.

- **A curiosity:** a candidate connected to an interest, such as observing flowers, growing a culinary crop or learning a suitable propagation method.

These roles are original planning categories, not scientific plant groups. One candidate can fit more than one role. The point is to avoid selecting three demanding novelties without noticing that all require unfamiliar care.

Keep the curiosity within your real constraints. An experiment should test a sensible question under appropriate care, not whether a plant can survive known unsuitable conditions.

Make a candidate card

Create a card for each serious candidate, using species and cultivar where relevant:

- Candidate name and reliable identification source: ___

- Intended position: ___

- Light and temperature requirements, with source: ___

- Water and drainage needs relevant to the setup: ___

- Expected size and support needs: ___

- Household safety and local suitability checks: ___

- Essential purchases and estimated total cost: ___

- Care tasks I already know: ___

- One skill or uncertainty I would need to address: ___

- What I want to learn: ___

Record the date of price or availability checks because those can change. Keep a source link beside substantive care information. If two reliable sources appear to conflict, examine whether they describe different conditions, varieties or growth stages before choosing the advice you prefer.

An unresolved card stays unresolved. Do not fill missing requirements with assumptions simply to complete the shortlist.

Apply a small selection rubric

First mark each gate as pass, unresolved or fail. A failed gate excludes the candidate for this attempt; an unresolved one requires more information.

Required gate	Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate C
Identified accurately enough	___	___	___
Suitable growing position available	___	___	___
Household and local suitability resolved	___	___	___
Essential care and space manageable	___	___	___
Total cost within chosen limit	___	___	___

For candidates that pass, use a simple comparison: 0 means poor fit, 1 means workable with a clear adjustment and 2 means a good fit now.

Preference	A	B	C
Fits my current routine	___	___	___
Teaches something I care about	___	___	___
Uses supplies or skills I already have	___	___	___
Leaves room for the existing collection	___	___	___

The total is a conversation with yourself, not an objective ranking of plant quality. Keep the written reasons. Before selecting several candidates, check them together: two plants may each pass because each fits the same free position, yet they may not both fit there. Assign distinct space where needed and review their combined cost and workload. Reassess remaining candidates after the first choice uses a shared resource. If a number conceals an important difference, use the reason instead of the total.

Turn a choice into a fair experiment

For each selected plant, write one question and a review point. “Can I maintain this plant in the verified conditions of the spare-room shelf with my normal routine?” is more useful than “Will I be good at plants?”

Define what evidence you will collect: a baseline photograph, actual care notes, growth or flowering observations where appropriate, and the effort involved. Choose a review period suitable to the question and plant. Do not demand flowering from a plant outside its expected stage or season merely because your calendar says the trial is over.

Maintain appropriate care throughout. If a problem develops, investigate and respond rather than preserving a harmful setup for the sake of the experiment. Record changes honestly. A single plant in one home cannot establish a universal causal rule.

If you are comparing two arrangements, keep other relevant conditions as similar as practical, but acknowledge that this is a household observation, not a controlled research trial.

Read a fictional shortlist decision

A gardener has one bright, suitable position, a second position that still needs observation and a third place reserved for an existing plant's winter move. Three attractive candidates initially appear possible.

Candidate A passes the checks and fits the first position. Candidate B needs information about the second position, so it remains on the shortlist. Candidate C would occupy the winter refuge and create a later space problem, so it is deferred.

The gardener starts with A, records the baseline and completes the light observations for B. This is a successful three-candidate decision even though only one plant is acquired. The process has protected the existing collection and avoided buying a problem to solve later.

Review outcomes without blaming the plant or yourself

At the review point, use four possible outcomes:

- **Keep:** the plant and routine fit, with observations supporting continued care.

- **Adjust:** a specific, appropriate change may improve the fit; record it and review again.

- **Learn more:** identity, symptoms or requirements remain uncertain enough to need advice.

- **Do not repeat:** this plant or setup does not suit the current circumstances.

A disappointing result is information, not a personal verdict. Record what happened and which factors you could not separate. Avoid claiming a plant is universally difficult because one attempt failed, or universally easy because one succeeded.

If you decide not to keep a plant, arrange a responsible outcome appropriate to its health and local rules. Do not pass a suspected pest problem to another household without disclosure, and do not release unwanted plants into natural areas.

Leave a clear next step

Finish the shortlist with a decision for every candidate: start now, gather information, revisit later or decline. Attach a reason and, where useful, a review date tied to a real change such as available space or a suitable season.

Keep the candidate cards with the outcome notes. The next shortlist can then begin with what you have learned about your conditions, interests and workload. Three thoughtful choices should make the collection more enjoyable and manageable, not simply larger.

Sources and scope

The RHS sources support matching indoor plants to real growing conditions and recognising the limits of easy-care claims. The shortlist roles, gates, scoring rubric and review outcomes are original decision tools. Check each actual candidate against current plant-specific, household-safety and local guidance before acquiring it.