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THE POWER OF PLANTS

Gorgeous greenery is a growing Instagram trend right now – with good reason, says *Louise Atkinson*. Whether you want sounder sleep or better work focus, the humble house plant is your new best friend

The hottest home accessory of the moment? The humble house plant, which has found itself elevated from dull to definitely sexy. It has become deeply aspirational to ‘dress’ your bathroom with jungle creepers, style your living space with indoor trees and arrange tasteful selections of greenery of all shapes, sizes and textures. People are even taking plant ‘shelfies’ to post on Instagram (where #houseplants has been hashtagged over 3.5 million times). But the interior design trend for plant-filled rooms is also hugely supported by a growing belief in the health benefits of indoor greenery.

Horticulturist Fran Bailey is leading the way with three London plant shops, 36,000 followers on Instagram and a book called

The Healing Power of Plants that’s been backed by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS). ‘We have a real desire to embrace nature and bring greenery into our homes,’ says Fran. Such is the size of this plant-powered craze that she and five other teams had been invited to create house-plant stands at this year’s Chelsea Flower Show (now moved to next year due to coronavirus; instead you can watch her virtual gardening advice video on the RHS channel on YouTube).

Fran first noticed the trend a few years ago as customers at her flower shop began asking for plants instead – particularly those with perceived health benefits. ‘More and more were enquiring about which varieties are best for cleaning the air and which can help ease anxiety or improve your sleep.’ Scientists argue that you require quite a number in a small area to achieve a positive health impact, but, says Fran, you’re likely to become hooked rapidly and start to gather house plants anyway. →

WHY PLANTS ARE GOOD FOR YOU

THEY PURIFY THE AIR

Science shows plants can be a great way to improve the quality of air in any room – particularly in a double-glazed or centrally heated office environment – because they absorb carbon dioxide and yield oxygen as part of the natural process of photosynthesis.

At a time when more of us are worrying about toxins, it is great to know that plants can actively filter the air we breathe. Scientists at Nasa, keen to identify the best foliage to grace their space stations, have even devised a list of top 'air-cleaning' plants. They found some – including the money plant and the spider plant – to be extremely efficient at filtering out everyday pollutants from the air, including harmful toxins such as benzene,

'HAVING PLANTS ON YOUR DESK CAN INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY BY 15 PER CENT'

formaldehyde and xylene found in some furnishings, DIY and cleaning products and air fresheners.

Plants are also great moisture regulators, says Fran, adding humidity to our dry, centrally heated homes: 'Whether the air is dry or your room tends to be damp, the plants will help to balance out the moisture levels.' Humidity and good indoor air circulation have been shown to help prevent the spread of flu and other types of virus.

WORK PERFORMANCE PERKS UP

The strategic positioning of a pot plant or two can boost focus. Studies show workers are more productive when their office is filled with greenery. Having plants on your desk can increase productivity by 15 per cent, increasing 'workplace satisfaction' and self-reported levels of concentration, boosting memory retention by as much as 20 per cent.

DREAMING OF A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP?

Artfully placed around your bedroom, house plants can be a useful aid to restful slumber. Plant-derived essential oils such as lavender and jasmine have long been popular with insomniacs, but plant-lovers now swear by the oxygenating effects of small cactus-like plants called succulents, especially if you keep



MAKE YOUR HOUSE PLANT FEEL AT HOME

1

Check (with the shop or online) whether your plant prefers a shady or a sunny spot.

2

Position your plants away from radiators.

3

Don't buy just one – plants prefer to be in groups so they can create a microclimate to protect each other.

4

Feel the compost around the plant with your fingers each day – if dry, give it some water.

5

Regularly check your plant for signs of what it might need.

6

In summer months your plant is more likely to grow or flower, so add plant feed (such as Baby Bio) to the water.

7

In winter many plants become semi-dormant and require less attention (and water).

8

Gently wipe off dust with a soft, damp cloth.

9

If you see roots poking out, it's time to transfer your plant to a larger pot.

10

Some plants (eg, money plant, philodendron) are toxic – keep away from children and pets.

one or two in a pot by the bed. That's because certain varieties of plant – notably those which evolved to endure the extreme heat of desert terrain – reserve their photosynthesising until the evenings and continue pumping out refreshing oxygen throughout the night, when other plants stop. Orchids have the same effect.

THEY'RE NATURE'S STRESS-BUSTERS

Being close to nature has been shown to lower stress levels – even looking at the colour green can reduce feelings of anxiety. 'Simply looking at and touching plants can lift your mood, and there's no doubt that being in close proximity to plants can facilitate healing and improve wellbeing,' says Fran. Studies have even shown that hospital patients tolerate pain better if there are plants on the ward.

Interaction with indoor plants may reduce psychological and physiological stress. 'They can have a soothing effect,' explains nutritionist and botanical medicine expert Rick Hay. In fact, the University of Exeter recently published a study which showed being involved with plants can contribute to an increase in wellbeing.

Dr Siân de Bel, the study's lead researcher, says: 'While being able to access an outdoor space such as a garden is important, there could be something extra in that sense of ownership and caring for something – using that space is what really leads to health benefits.'

GROWING THEM MAKES US FEEL HAPPIER

'There is a lot of talk right now about the psychological benefits of "nurturing" your plants and the joy to be had from caring for something and watching it respond,' says Fran. 'People are looking at house plants as a way of connecting with nature by bringing the outside in.'

There is certainly something mindful and even meditative about the process of watering, feeding, spraying, nipping and pruning, and a growing body of science now supports the idea that looking after plants – whether that's digging a veg patch, fiddling with a window box or lovingly spritzing the ferns in your downstairs loo – is very good for your health.

ANYONE CAN DO IT!

Even if you've got a poor track record in plant care, it's never too late to turn things around and acquire a few green-fingered skills. 'Saying you're rubbish with plants is like saying you can't cook,' says Fran. 'It's just a question of confidence, and you get the best results – and the best psychological benefits for yourself →



'WE HAVE A REAL DESIRE TO EMBRACE NATURE AND BRING GREENERY INTO OUR HOMES,' SAYS FRAN

FRAN'S FAVOURITES FOR FOLIAGE

SWISS CHEESE PLANT



Enjoying a surge in popularity as a big architectural plant for a bright spot near a window. Particularly sought after is the new and rare variegated form, which costs around £300 for a small one, or you can try to grow your own from a cutting (try etsy.com, £85).

CALATHEAS



Much admired for its striking leaf markings, it's suited to a shady room or basement flat.

FERNS



Incredibly hardy all year round and come in a variety of textures and forms with different leaf patterns and shapes. They grow happily in shaded areas and love the humidity of a kitchen or bathroom.

PHILODENDRON



This trailing plant will give your house a jungle feel.

AND IF YOU FANCY A CHANGE OF GREENERY...



THE PRETTY PEACE LILY COULD ALSO IMPROVE YOUR AIR QUALITY

– if you treat your plant more like a pet than an ornament.'

Whether you find yourself gathering house plants around you in a bid to soak up their health benefits, or just because they make you

'SIMPLY LOOKING AT PLANTS CAN LIFT YOUR MOOD AND IMPROVE YOUR WELLBEING'

happy, there's no doubt this home horticulture craze is growing fast. 'We have a real desire to embrace nature and bring greenery into our homes,' says Fran, 'and once you start, it's difficult to stop.'

WHERE TO BUY

Along with local garden centres and the likes of Homebase and B&Q, there are a huge range of online delivery services which will drop your chosen house plants right to your door. Try Patch Plants (patchplants.com) who send out an extensive care guide with their foliage and have 'plant doctors' on call in case of a vegetation emergency. Or, for a monthly surprise, try Beards & Daisies who offer a range of subscriptions for their signature plants (from £24.99 per month, beardsanddaisies.co.uk)



The Healing Power of Plants by Fran Bailey is published by Penguin, £12.99; you can follow Fran on Instagram @forest_london and buy plants online at forest.london

BEST FOR THE BEDROOM

★ **ECHEVERIA and KALANCHOE (right)** Succulents that stay small, these sun-lovers should be kept in a bright spot and watered sparingly. They produce oxygen at night rather than through the day, so improve air quality as you sleep.
★ **ORCHIDS** Not only do these have the benefit of emitting

oxygen at night, they also clear the air of a volatile toxin called xylene, found in some paint and varnishes.
★ **ARECA PALM** If you have space, this will make a great focal point in your bedroom. It acts as a natural humidifier (larger plants can give off up to a litre of moisture a day).



BEST FOR THE WORKSPACE

★ **MOTHER-IN-LAW'S TONGUE (also known as SNAKE PLANT or SANSEVIERIA)** This has long, elegantly spiky leaves and is the number-one plant for clearing toxins from the air.
★ **ZZ PLANT** This workplace hero can tolerate a certain amount of neglect (if left unattended over the weekend) and is happy in both shady conditions and bright light.
★ **IVY (right)** This lowers levels

of airborne mould as well as calming allergies.
★ **PEACE LILY** A tough and very forgiving plant that could improve air quality by as much as 60 per cent.
★ **ROSEMARY** Great if you have a sunny windowsill, this culinary herb has been shown to improve brain function, boost energy levels and lift mood if you rub a few leaves between your fingers and inhale deeply.



BEST FOR THE BATHROOM

★ **FERNS** such as **BOSTON and BIRDS NEST (right)** They love the humidity created by the shower and will tolerate the lower light levels if you have frosted glass windows.
★ **RHIPSALIS** This trailing plant loves humidity and can be hung from a curtain or shower rail to

create an outdoor vibe.
★ **AIR PLANTS** These thrive in a humid atmosphere and can live without the need for compost, so can simply be placed on a sunny windowsill or a small shelf in a bright spot. They're an excellent choice if you are short on space.



BEST FOR THE KITCHEN

★ **STRING OF PEARLS** The perfect plant to hang in the kitchen if you have a south-facing sunny window, as it loves the humidity created by the sink.
★ **RUBBER PLANT (right)** This fast-growing, floor-standing statement plant would work well

in a kitchen/diner with space and plenty of light.
★ **CEROPEGIA (also known as STRING OF HEARTS)** A pretty, delicate little trailing plant that is great for tight spaces. Looks lovely hanging from a narrow shelf.

