

Decorating with indoor plants

Bring a dull room to life with a colorful, well-placed plant

by Kit Davey

Lush, healthy houseplants add natural color, texture and life to any interior setting. A sterile-looking or dull room can instantly be brought to life with the addition of a well-placed potted plant.

The perfect accessory

Houseplants are unsurpassed in adding visual appeal, on a budget:

** They are ideal fillers for awkward spaces or gaps. An empty corner comes alive when a tall Ficus is snuggled into it; a set of bookshelves is more approachable when an ivy is nestled between the stacks, and we are reminded of English country cottages when we spot a rosemary topiary or pot of parsley on a kitchen counter top.

** They blend into and enhance any style of decor. A split-leaf palm can make a beach cottage appear more tropical and yet make a traditional, paneled den appear statelier.

** They are inexpensive. If properly cared for, a plant bought for 99 cents at the grocery store can last for years, all the while providing joy and beauty.

Other benefits

In addition to the natural beauty and grace plants can bring into your home, there are other benefits:

** Plants remove indoor air pollutants produced by gas furnaces and stoves, cigarette smoke, paint and carpeting. Many energy-efficient homes and offices are sealed environments with little or no fresh air. Pollutants such as benzene, formaldehyde and trichloroethylene can be trapped indoors and cause health problems.

Fortunately, pollutant-gobbling plants are fairly common and readily available. Ivy, spider plants, palms, dracaena, peace lilies and dieffenbachia all have chemical-absorbing and air-purifying qualities.

** Research has shown that having plants in your environment is psychologically beneficial. I read about a hospital study in which one set of patients was placed in rooms with a view to a brick wall, and another with a view to trees. The group with the natural view recovered more quickly with fewer complications than the other group. Another study noted that for those who work in a corporate environment a "forested" area (which was set up for the study) was highly sought after by employees. A behavioral assessment revealed increased peace of mind and cooperation within those who worked in this space. When the plants were removed, behavior was affected negatively: irritability and quarreling rose.

Placing your plants

Plants can be used in every room of your home, but make sure you check their lighting and watering needs, as well as their "temperament," before placing them:

** In the kitchen: Remove the clutter from the top of your refrigerator and replace it with a fluffy Boston fern in basket. Place an herb garden on the sunny sill over your sink. Put a small peace lily or

two in a cookie jar or in a brightly colored bowl on the countertop.

** In the bath: Place an African violet on top of the commode. Orchids love the humidity your shower creates -- why not put one on your vanity? Try hanging a spider plant in front of the window or in the corner.

** In the bedroom: Placing a peace lily on your night stand is one of the best ways to bring in oxygen and remove the "bio-effluence" and the carbon monoxide you generate by breathing. (I don't really want to know what bio-effluence is, do you?)

** In the living or family room: Put a trailing ivy in a brass container and place it on the mantel. End tables and coffee tables are ideal locations for displaying plants in unusual containers, such as an antique sewing basket, an old wooden jewelry box with the lid open, a vegetable or fruit can with a vintage label, a dainty lady's boot or a teapot. There's always an empty corner that can be softened by a tall palm or Ficus benjamina.

Further suggestions

** Purchase only healthy plants.

** Spray "Green Glow" on your plant's leaves to keep them shiny or rub them with mayonnaise.

** Get rid of scraggly, misshapen or brown-leafed plants. Nothing can make a room look sadder than a plant that needs to be put out of its misery.