

Clean and Healthy: The Whys and Hows of House Plants

Written and photographed by Sean James



House plants clean the air of carcinogens and beautify the home.

Many of us love house plants. If pressed, most of us could not give a real reason. We might say “They make the house seem more welcoming,” or “I just like plants!”

There are many reasons that we should have plants in the house. Plants make a house feel warmer, both emotionally and literally. Emotionally they

satisfy our need to connect with nature and give us much-needed green during a barren winter. Physically, plants humidify the air, making it feel warmer. This can even help with breathing problems for many, although people with asthma or allergies may have issues with spores from soil-borne fungi.

A fascinating thing about houseplants is that they clean

the air of carcinogens remarkably effectively. Research done by NASA shows that a spider plant can remove 80 per cent of the available carcinogens from the air in one day. Chemicals such as formaldehyde which are released from our textiles, can cause severe long-term illness. Dieffenbachia is also a very good air cleaner although it is poisonous if eaten. The surprise plant is Gerbera Daisy which is the most effective of all air-cleaning plants despite its diminutive size.

Moisture is a very important issue for house plants, and one which many of us get wrong. Never put your plants on a weekly schedule. The only way to tell if the plant needs water is to stick your finger in the dirt. If it's cool and moist, it doesn't need water. If the soil's warm and dry, then give it a drink. More plants die from overwatering than under-watering.

Keeping soil moisture low also helps reduce populations of a tiny brown fly called a fungus gnat, and it also means that fewer fungal spores will be in the air. Fungus gnats rarely injure plants, usually feeding on decaying organic material only, but they are annoying.

Two other frustrating insects that effect indoor plants are whitefly and spider mite. Whitefly is a very tiny flying insect which sucks juices from plant leaves, slowly causing the decline of the plant. Spider mites are very difficult to see. Look for leaves having a slight grayish tinge and fine webbing near the branch tips and where the leaf joins the stem, (the leaf axil). If the specimen is worth enough to you, biologic controls can be purchased, even through mail order. The parasitic wasp called *Encarsia formosa* can be purchased as parasitized whitefly eggs on a paper card which is hung in the plant canopy. The wasps are so tiny you will never see them once they're released. They can't even sting. They hatch and hunt down other whitefly eggs until the populations are brought down. Predatory

spider mites can be purchased to hunt and destroy two-spotted spider mite. Neither of these processes is inexpensive so you have to decide whether the plant is worth saving. Tropical Hibiscus and a few others are effected by these pests but many plants are almost bullet proof.

If you're worried that you don't have a green thumb, start slowly. Get yourself a cactus which requires so little care as to be practically self maintaining. The Spider plant mentioned earlier is also almost impossible to kill. Generally, the only way you can kill these is by caring for them too much, e.g., by overwatering. If you manage to keep these alive, try something like a Chinese evergreen, cast iron plant, Mother-in-law's tongue, (one of the all-time best common names EVER), or Dracaena, which are all easy to look after and very useful. Eventually you may get yourself all the way up to an African violet or orchid.

Orchids are actually easier to grow than African violets, usually needing only a weekly soaking. Not much beats the pride of bringing an orchid back into bloom year after year. African violets tend to be much more sensitive, especially to changes in watering. Just baby step up the ladder of green “thumbness.” You'll be glad you did, and you might even inspire one of the youngsters in the home to embrace nature and horticulture! **NEV**

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