

Indoor purifying plants



Although we live near mountains and the magnificent Mojave, with all their unique flowers, shrubs and trees, we tend to recede into our air-conditioned caves – house to car to job site, and back again.

Because we spend so much time indoors, we need control over what we breathe. In energy efficient homes and offices, there are often toxic substances, such as formaldehyde, benzene, and other volatile organic compounds, or VOC's. Paint, plastic, particleboard, carpeting and cleaning products can all be sources of compounds that must be kept to a minimum for good health. Even our very low humidity can be a problem. There are many humidifiers and air purifying systems on the market, but in addition, you might consider bringing potted plants into your house or to your job.

A NASA scientist named Dr. B. C. Wolverton was investigating potential air purification systems for space travel in the 1980's. He found that a number of plants are very effective air scrubbers. Several indoor palms, as well as common plants including dracaena, Boston fern, English ivy, rubber tree, as well as the lovely spathiphyllum (peace lily), are among the most useful "living filters".

This means more than simply putting a fern into the corner and watering it when and if you remember. It means creating little zones of healthy plants within the environment. The entire plant – its soil, roots and of course its leaves – absorbs the toxins and apparently breaks them down, taking them out of circulation.

A hundred square feet, say a ten by ten room, would need two or three plants, each of them in a ten-inch pot. Group an **assortment** of plants together, because the research indicates that different species are more efficient at removing one toxin or another.

Some critics have voiced a concern that the high humidity right around plants, the foliage and, more importantly, any water sitting in a saucer underneath the pot, might encourage fungal spores. That would be another interior pollutant. You can prevent this by growing healthy plants. Make sure that they have access to light so they can grow properly. Most of these air-scrubbing plants are from environments more like a rainforest than a desert. They prefer moderately bright indirect light so they would be most successful in an east or southeast window, rather than one with a west or southwestern exposure. Fertilize and water them regularly. Do not let them dry out, nor let them stand in water. The plants do not do well under those conditions, and stagnant water would certainly be unpleasant.

The worst outcome is that there will be happy, healthy interior plants. The best is that anyone in the room will be breathing cleaner air and will have happy, healthy plants around.

At Cooperative Extension, we have a fact sheet available that covers the basics of putting plants to work cleaning your air. Its title is “Growing your own clean air” and you can call the extension office for it. For more in-depth information, Dr. Wolverton’s book, “How to grow fresh air” is available from Penguin Books.

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