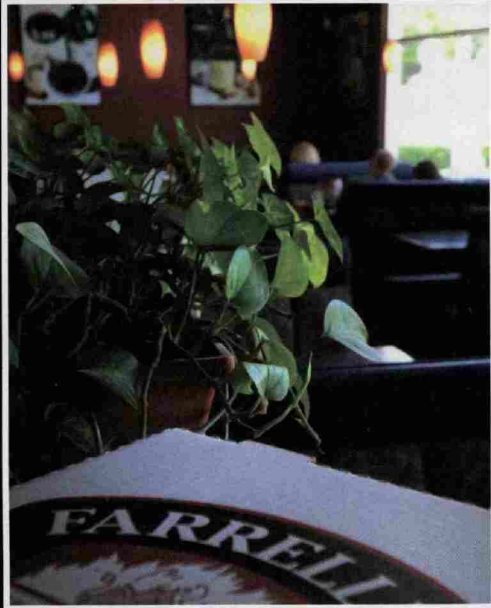


FRONT OF THE HOUSE *Ambiance*



INDOOR *Oasis*

Live plants add instant atmosphere, bring unexpected benefits to diners and employees alike

Story by Hilda J. Brucker
Photos by Rick Daugherty

Interior landscaping — the use of plants and perhaps even elements like a fountain — can add instant atmosphere to a restaurant. Rooms with greenery are warm and appealing, fostering a sense of well-being that in turn contributes to the bottom line, says Todd Ferguson, managing director for *Ambius*, an interior landscaping and design firm. “Diners are looking for ambiance in restaurants ... and plants add to that,” he points out. “And when people stay longer and feel more comfortable, they’re more likely to order dessert or that extra drink.”

Greenery can also enhance diners’ comfort by reducing background noise. Experts say that plants make the biggest difference in areas that are “acoustically live,” meaning they contain many hard surfaces that sound bounces off of (as opposed to carpeting, heavy curtains or upholstered furniture, which absorb sound better).

In addition, a growing body of research shows that live plants bring benefits beyond the aesthetic. Studies performed at both Texas A&M University and Washington State University found that a plant-filled environment lowered workplace stress (as measured by employees’ blood pressure readings) while increasing worker productivity and problem solving skills. And plants are also natural air purifiers: a 1989 NASA study concluded that certain common houseplants like ivy and palms can remove up to 87 percent of indoor pollutants — including benzene and formaldehyde — within 24 hours.

Selecting and arranging plant material takes a bit of know-how; variables to consider include existing light levels, container size and type,



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Green Walls = Hot Trend

The hottest new trend in interior landscaping is the use of green walls – vertical spaces that are covered with vegetation.

In New York City, Pizza by Cer t  uses two living walls to further its image as a “green” pizzeria emphasizing recyclable materials and sustainability. One is made up of general plants, but the other is a two-foot wide swath of basil, oregano and thyme that brings a new slant to locally grown produce. “We use the herbs in our pizza,” says

manager Miguel Palma. “People know it’s fresh because you can see it growing here. We don’t use any food in cans.”

According to Todd Ferguson of Ambius, an interior landscaping firm, modern technology makes the vertical gardens possible. A system of modular panels holds plants, as well as the growing medium and even the irrigation system. “It’s computer driven, to deliver the right amount of moisture to each panel in the wall,” he explains.

and the effect plant placement will have on traffic patterns.

Spiro Alexandrides, franchise owner of two Double Dave’s Pizzaworks locations, opted for a professionally designed plantscape in his Euless, Texas, store. “We thought about doing it on our own, but didn’t think we could do a good enough job,” he says. Rather than individual plants, the dining area now contains six long, rectangular planters that are filled with several varieties of plants for a lush, multi-tiered appearance. “The design helps divide the restaurant into cozier areas,” Alexandrides explains. “It really adds a lot of character, and it literally changed the restaurant once they installed the planters.” He also relies on a professional service to care for the plants, watering and fertilizing as necessary, and keeping the leaves free from dust — a maintenance chore that is often overlooked, to the detriment of plant health and appearance.

Ferguson advises that a professional plantscape service can be especially useful for restaurants with dim lighting, where do-it-yourself plant installations may be destined to fail. Yet many restaurant managers report they do fine without professional horticultural oversight. At Chris’ Pizza House in Atlanta, booths and tables line the perimeter of the restaurant, while the center contains a multitude of clustered house plants in all sizes, thriving under a large skylight. A fountain (no longer operational) contributes to the air of a Mediterranean terrace. Manager

Akbar Faiz says he got the design idea 25 years ago from magazine pictures of open-air restaurants in Greece. The kitchen staff waters the plants and handles the relatively infrequent need for repotting, but overall it’s the abundance of natural light that keeps them healthy, says Faiz.

Luciano Italian Restaurant & Pizzeria in Herndon, Virginia, contains over 100 potted plants. Many are low-light tolerant vines, like philodendron, that are trained on lattice suspended from the ceiling so that patrons feel like they’re dining under an arbor. More plants line the windowsills and sit on the floor in front of windows. “My busboy takes care of the plants; he knows what he’s doing,” says manager Patrick Noonan.

Surprisingly enough, a restaurateur can expect to budget much less for live greenery than for artwork or cut flowers.

Do-it-yourselfers may spend several hundred dollars up front to fill a dining room with plants, but ongoing costs to maintain and replace plants are negligible. “We spend perhaps \$200 a year,” estimates Faiz.

At Double Dave’s, Alexandrides eliminated upfront costs of owning plants outright by contracting with a professional firm on a monthly fee arrangement, paying only \$60 a month. “It’s a very nominal amount,” he says, “and for what these guys do, this is a no-brainer. They take care of all

the plants and replace them if there are problems. They do a very good job.” He notes that he can also upgrade his existing contract at any time to add more plants or seasonal color.

Ferguson concurs that by contracting with a professional firm, a small restaurant can easily keep costs as low as \$100 a month for either live greenery or replica plants (silk or plastic). “People often think there’s a cost savings with replica plants, and there might potentially be some, but a silk plant needs to be cleaned regularly, maybe more so than a live plant. So there are costs involved with maintaining, cleaning and replacing replica plants,” he says. ♦

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