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Breathe easy

FEATURES - PLANTS

Encourage interiorscape customers to create healthier environments with plants

CHRIS KARL | November 14, 2011 |

I recently met with an architect who designs healthcare facilities. He ranted about how he absolutely detests the use of live plants in the properties he designs. "I don't like that I can't control the life cycle of the plant and how it continually changes its look," he said with obvious disdain. I believe this obviously sedentary and obese architect has become, like many people in this country, so far removed from nature and healthy living that he has forgotten the benefits of greenery.

Green is good. More and more companies today are reducing or eliminating plants in the workplace to save money. They fail to realize, however, that this cost-cutting measure is short-term thinking that will compromise their employees' well-being. A growing body of research demonstrates that access to a natural environment indoors, where we all spend the majority of our waking hours, may improve health and well-being.

Being around plants reduces stress and engenders a feeling of well-being and improved energy in most people —a benefit that is even more acute if correct lighting is in place. Because plants have a large surface area and exchange water and gases with their surroundings, they have a unique ability to tackle and improve many environmental problems.

"A pleasing and positive workplace that is presented as a spiritually satisfying sanctuary with natural light and greenery is enormously beneficial for a person's well-being," said Dr. Gilda Carle, psychotherapist, author and professor. "Being able to access and enjoy surroundings that reduce stress and engage the senses is highly therapeutic for people."

Here are my selections for the top five plants, which not only heighten and satisfy our senses with their funky and trendy style, but also help to keep our workplace environments happier and healthier:

1. Ficus Pandurata. The Ficus Pandurata or fiddleleaf fig grows best in a high to medium-high light environment and is an interesting variation on the standard, well-known Ficus Elastica rubber plant. The large leaves can add a striking accent to the home or office.

2. Polyscias fabian. A native of Brazil, polyscias or geranium-leaf aralia or arilia fabian is an evergreen shrub or small tree with a compact habit. While it is widely used as hedges in the tropics, in the United States we use it as a beautiful, eco-friendly border as well as a captivating stand-alone "look at me" tree.

3. Dracaena Janet Craig Compacta Dracaena is a genus of 40 species of subtropical, evergreen, woody plants grown for their statuesque form and ornamental foliage. They are sometimes mistakenly identified as palms but are actually more closely related to lilies. The name Dracaena is derived from the Greek word "drakaina," a female dragon. The link between plant and beast is the resinous red gum produced when the stem is cut, which, when thickened, is supposed to resemble dragon's blood. It is used as a varnish and in photo engraving.

4. Philodendron Red Congo. Red Congo is a new and distinct cultivar of philodendron. It is a product of the cross between Philodendron 'Imperial Red' as the female parent and an unidentified cultivar of the Philodendron tatei. This plant grows vigorously in an upright but spreading or open manner. New Red Congo leaves are brownish maroon to almost red in color while the large mature ones are dark green in color with a touch of red.

5. Dracaena Marginita Character. Originally from Madagascar, Dracaena are known for their visually arresting ornamental foliage. An increasingly popular indoor plant in the modern workplace, the plant, which can grow up to 15 feet in height, is supported by an



aged and knobby trunk which gives it a unique character.

Big impact. It isn't necessary to fill every available space with a plant to achieve a healthful atmosphere; just a few good-quality specimens located in select rooms, and where employees work or take their rest breaks, can be sufficient.

"The reasons why this has a beneficial effect are a subtle but complex mixture of the physiological (improved humidity, reduced noise, etc.) and psychological," said Kenneth Freeman, international technical director at Ambius who has led many research initiatives on the benefits of plants in the workplace. "Being around plants certainly seems to reduce stress and engender a feeling of well-being in most people, a benefit that is even more acute if correct lighting is in place. The fact that a workplace has been prepared to spend money on something that has no obvious function than to make the environment more attractive may also be a contributing factor, by sending a signal to staff that management cares about its employees and visitors.

"There is now general agreement within the scientific community that plants improve the indoor environment, and are useful weapons in the fight against the modern phenomenon known as sick building syndrome (SBS)," continued Freeman. "No specific cause of SBS has been identified, but poor air quality, excessive background noise and inadequate temperature and light control are thought to be important factors. Because plants have a large surface area and exchange water and gases with their surroundings, they have a unique ability to tackle many environmental problems."

In particular, plants can reduce levels of carbon dioxide, which can accumulate in buildings from the breathing of its occupants and the by-products of heating systems and electrical equipment. Plants also increase the relative humidity, which should be between 40-60 percent relative humidity for maximum human comfort. Plants reduce levels of certain pollutant gases, such as formaldehyde, benzene and nitrogen dioxide as well as airborne dust levels. Plants also reduce air temperatures and background noise levels.

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