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Reading Eagle: Bill Uhrich | A tree provided by Ambius at One Meridian Plaza, Spring Township.

Ambius: Plants benefit workers in offices, other locations

By Kristin Boyd

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In 2013, Steve Yarmush was relieved to learn his new office would be in the old drive-up area at Bellco Federal Credit Union's Wyomissing branch.

The natural light streaming through the large window, he said, would allow him, and his beloved plants, to flourish, just as they had when he worked in the company's now-closed Reading branch.

With a variety of plants, including his favorite bonsai trees, the space resembles a minigreenhouse and helps Yarmush feel more productive and relaxed during the workday. Even his co-workers stop by when they need to unwind for a few minutes.

"The reason I keep plants in my office has to do with my love of gardening and nature," said Yarmush, chief information officer at Bellco. "My job can be stressful, so when I am upset I take a deep breath and look at one of my plants. It makes me realize of all the beauty given to us by Mother Nature. Being in this frame of mind allows me to put my stress in perspective."

Research is validating the benefits of plants in the workplace, so their positive effects cannot be understated or ignored, said Kenneth Freeman, head of innovation at Ambius. Ambius is owned and operated by J.C. Ehrlich, a subsidiary of Rentokil, 1125 Berkshire Blvd., Wyomissing.

"It is more than just the aesthetic reasons," Freeman said.

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Research contradicts the lean office trend, in which workspaces have minimal decor.

"It must be much more deep-seated than that," he said. "The main benefits seem to be psychological or behavioral. The more profound effects are the way plants make people feel on a subconscious level and how it relates to an innate need to reconnecting with nature."

Plants can increase employee productivity by 15 percent and boost employee satisfaction in the workplace by up to 40 percent, according to a study published in September 2014 in the American Psychological Journal of Experimental Psychology.

In addition, Ambius created the Power of Plants in the Workplace, an infographic that lists benefits such as positive attitudes, increased attention spans and idea generation, reduced noise pollution, reduced air toxins and reduced absenteeism. Plants also invigorate sterile office environments, improve general well-being, provide a sense of ownership and value and help to boost morale, Freeman said.

"It's all about making people happier," Freeman said. "If you're happier, you tend to be healthier. And if you're healthier you tend to be more productive. It's really all about people. If you value people, you want to make the space as healthy as possible."

Local young professionals agree. Tsehay Jackson, a teacher at Reading Intermediate High School, said she places plants on windowsills in her classroom. Madelin Collins said plants add a refreshing sense of calmness to her office at City Hall. Sabrina Fernandez, owner of Shillington-based Eco-Friendly Cleaning by Sabrina, has plants on the desk in her home office.

"It makes me happy and purifies the air, too," Fernandez said.

Ambius' services include live and artificial plant displays, a complete office plant service and living wall and green roof designs, according to the company's website, which includes beautiful photos of plants in the workplace. For example, company executives could install a tabletop philodendron in a hallway, give a small office plant to each employee or position a ficus tree in the lobby.

"We have a varied portfolio built around enriching a building's environment," said Freeman, a 20-year employee of Ambius. "If you have an enriched environment, you work better. It makes your office is a better place to work. That's the takeaway."

The company's living green wall installations are gaining international attention. A newer innovation created 10 to 15 years ago in France, sustainable green walls, provide a natural boost of energy to workspaces, Freeman said. Also commonly called vertical gardens or living walls, they work as a natural air-filtration system. They can improve insulation, regulate temperature and humidity, reduce energy costs and help companies earn LEED points, which, in turn, help to increase a property's value.

Green walls also create a wow factor, Freeman said. Lancaster General Hospital's Cancer Center recently installed a breathtaking green wall, and Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Chester County, boasts the largest green wall in the world, he said.

"Green walls are a breath of fresh air," he said. "They significantly improve the inside environment, and they do not take up a huge amount of space. That combination has made them popular since there is often a premium on floor space."

The company's live picture products, which are portrait-sized miniature green walls consisting of about 18 plants, are also popular in the U.S., Freeman said. The "pictures," which can be hung on the wall like a piece of artwork, are affordable and do not require wiring or external plumbing. They often make spaces inviting and visually appealing.

"It takes a minute amount of money to implement nature-based greenery," Freeman said. "But it's going to have a tremendous impact on your work environment."

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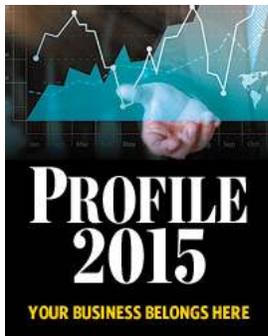
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