

# Flower Power For the Office

By Hella Keppo, CHT, BSC, MBA

**T**echnology runs our lives. An endless array of gadgets from personal organizers to cell phones to laptop computers let us complete tasks at lightning speed in the name of becoming more productive at work. However, in our pursuit of becoming more productive, many of us find technology leaves us tired and worn out.

There is a way to increase productivity while reducing stress. Studies throughout the world are discovering that flower power is a force to be reckoned with. Indoor plants add life, purify air quality, and beautify the space. And now employers can achieve the same effect sought by technology—increased productivity—without burnout simply by bringing plants indoors.

Dr. Roger S. Ulrich of Texas A&M University, Helen Russell, Surrey University, England, and Dr. Virginia Lohr of Washington State University report that plants significantly lower workplace stress and enhance productivity. In fact, participants in one study were 12 percent more productive and less stressed than those who worked in an environment without plants. An eight-month study found men who work among plants and flowers were 15 percent more creative than before.

Not only that, the studies show that once exposed to plant settings, employees feel less tired and experience an increase in happiness, friendliness, and assertiveness on the job. Researchers conclude that designing workspaces with indoor plants signals stability and offers employees a touch of humanity while stimulating a more productive environment.

Other studies have found that the proper use of plants can lower heating and cooling costs by as much as 20 percent. According to the International Society of Arboriculture, one young healthy tree can cool a room the same as 10 room-size air conditioners. Through evaporation and transpiration, plants control humidity within optimum levels. Other studies have found plants ideal for improving office air quality and reducing Sick Building

Syndrome, a common problem in modern sealed steel, glass, and concrete buildings. Plants have a remarkable ability to absorb toxins into their leaves and break down air-borne chemicals. It takes only 15 to 20 fair-sized plants to clean the air in a 1,500 square-foot space.

A two-year study in Norway found workers complained less about minor ailments after plants were introduced into the office. Complaints of dry skin were reduced by 25 percent, sore throats by 30 percent, coughs by 40 percent, and overall well being was improved by 84 percent. In a second study, overall worker absenteeism was reduced to 5.5 percent from 15.85 percent.



In Canada, the University of Guelph-Humber is conducting research on the air cleaning and energy-saving capabilities of plants. It erected the largest plant wall in



North America and the plants that fill the 30- by 55-foot, four-storey atrium act as a biofilter, cleaning the air. Similar to rainforests, which are often referred to as “lungs” of the earth, the plant-covered wall removes toxins from the air and supplies fresh, clean oxygen.

While it's not possible to erect an entire wall of plants in most offices, progressive human

resource managers recognize the power of flowers. Striving to provide employees with an environment that holds elements that comfort and inspire, workspaces are being designed with plants in mind. Plants help define space, provide privacy, reduce glare, and absorb sound, as well as reduce stress and increase productivity.

With more than 66 percent of people saying gardening is their favorite hobby, it makes sense to provide links with nature in the office. And workers themselves can easily add life to their desk. Those that garden can snip flowers from the garden to create a colorful bouquet on their desk. Those who don't garden can buy flowers from a florist. Good bets are long-lasting varieties such as Alstroemeria, Chysanthemums, or Carnations. With minimal care, they will look good for more than two weeks. And the sight of living color and greenery will soothe the soul on a subconscious level.

Plants and flowers are practical, easy ways to bring nature indoors. An aquarium is another. The bright colors and graceful movements of swimming fish captivate and soothe.

If it's not in the budget and not possible to install an aquarium or

design the entire office with plants, there are small-scale projects that will provide the same benefits. The calming sound of running water can be created with a tabletop water fountain. Consider placing a couple of healthy plants in the workspace that will survive in the given light conditions. Blooming African Violet, Golden Pothos Vine, or a Dragon Tree work nicely - but don't forget to water them! And finally, bring cut flower arrangements to work and place in full view.

The lush green of plants, the beautiful colors of flower arrangements, and the soothing sound of flowing water will go a long way toward de-stressing even the busiest worker. **YW**

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## 12 Reasons to Include Plants at Work

1. Plants are less expensive than powerful air filter systems
2. Plants can easily be moved or relocated
3. Plants are environmentally friendly
4. Plants are aesthetically stimulating
5. Plants help solve acoustic problems
6. Plants work with existing ventilation systems to clean the air
7. With professional care, plants provide high results at relatively low maintenance costs
8. Plants foster a balanced work environment
9. Plants are attractive room dividers in open-plan offices
10. Plants reduce eye strain by reflecting the yellow-green spectrum
11. Introducing plants requires no change to the structure of a building
12. Plants discretely solve environmental problems