

## Go Green for Good Health

*Five ways to make a little bit of nature go a long way to boost your well-being*

by Camille Noe Pagán, Wed., Aug. 15, 2007

It doesn't take a PhD to know that being in nature makes you feel good. But research shows the benefits of just a little bit of greenery goes way beyond a momentary mood boost — they can have a profound effect on your health.

Case in point: A recent study from Harvard Medical School found that people who had fresh flowers in their homes for just a few days felt less anxious and negative. They were happier, and had more enthusiasm and energy at work too. "It's amazing that such a small addition to one's environment can be so powerful," says study author Nancy Etcoff, PhD, director of the Program in Aesthetics and Well Being at Massachusetts General Hospital and a faculty member at Harvard Medical School.



Flower power is only half the story. Multiple studies point to a link between plants and improved physical health; Swedish researchers found that patients who could see trees and other greenery from their hospital window required less pain medication than those who didn't have a green view.

Then there's the clean air connection. "Plants and trees are like living, breathing air filters," says Georgianna Donadio, PhD, founder and director of the National Institute of Whole Health in Wellesley, Massachusetts. She explains, "They detoxify the air by absorbing many substances that can be harmful to humans, like excess carbon dioxide and dust particles. They also create oxygen, which we need to live and to function optimally." Donadio points to a study that NASA researchers conducted several years ago, which found that having just two houseplants per 100 square feet of space removed toxins and dramatically improved air quality in a home.

Of course, to get all these great benefits, you've got to up your exposure to

greenery. "The key is to spend time around nature every single day, even if it's just for 10 minutes," says Donadio.

### **Head outdoors**

No backyard? No problem. Even a walk around a leafy neighborhood or a visit to the local park on your lunch break will help you get your daily dose of nature, says Donadio.

### **Brighten your home with blossoms**

Ditch the "fresh flowers are for special occasions" mentality and make a point to add them to your home as often as possible. No need to spend big bucks on fancy arrangements — a few wildflowers picked from the side of the road will suffice. And Etcoff says that there's no "perfect" place to put your petals: "Anywhere you can see them will do the trick."

### **Put up some plants**

The more you can have around the house, the better, advises Donadio. But you can improve your health doubly by choosing varieties known to be excellent air cleaners, such as ivy, ficus, dragon trees, philodendrons, spider plants, ferns, chrysanthemums and palms. If your home doesn't get a lot of sun exposure, opt for plants that are labeled "low light" (if you're not sure, ask the gardening specialist at your nursery or home store).

### **Get creative**

Houseplants aren't the only answer to a green home. Donadio suggests creating a solarium on your windowsill; adding window boxes outside your window; placing an herb garden on your kitchen counter; or starting a small vegetable garden on your terrace. (Tip: Tomatoes and basil are especially hardy and easy to grow.) For help, purchase a book like [Gardening 101](#) (considered the gold standard of basic gardening); or call your local college or university cooperative extension office, where amateur and pro gardeners and farmers alike can get free agricultural advice.

### **Don't give up**

Too many would-be plant owners throw in the shovel because they've killed a plant (or four) in the past. "So you couldn't keep a few geraniums alive — so what? Having a green thumb is overrated," says Donadio with a laugh. "Buy hard-to-kill varieties, like spider plants and ferns, or get inexpensive plants like marigolds and replace them after they die. The point isn't to be a great gardener; it's to get more green in your life."