

THE HEALING POWER OF HOUSEPLANTS

Our green friends don't just make a room look nice, they can also boost our wellbeing and happiness, says Ciar Byrne

At this year's Chelsea Flower Show a *Monstera deliciosa* 'Albo variegata' – the Rolls-Royce of Swiss cheese plants – sat on a table hooked up by electrodes to a music-making program on a laptop computer. Every time someone touched the plant's leaves or ran their finger up and down its stem it responded by making music.

"Bio-sonification" is a great way of showing how plants respond to us – you can actually hear it when you touch a leaf,' says Mak Gilchrist, the creative director of spatial design studio The Edible Bus Stop. She was one of the creators of The Pharmacy of Houseplants display at Chelsea, where the *Monstera* was on show.

During lockdown, when we spent more time at home, many of us forged deeper relationships with our houseplants. They have come to be more than simply decorative.

David Domoney, a houseplant expert, TV presenter and author of the recently published *My Houseplant Changed My Life*, says: 'There has been a big growth in the sale of houseplants. Garden centres are seeing a 20 per cent rise. A lot of people are working from home, so what they're trying to do is embellish their space by bringing a little bit of greenery in. It has a positive impact on their lives.'

'Wellbeing can be helped in many different ways: to have a "green break" from the phone, from the laptop; to care and engage with plants

and refresh your mind and enhance your productivity.'

He suggests that something as simple as taking a cutting by pulling a leaf off a jade plant (*Crassula ovata*), putting it in a cup of water until it takes root, then potting it on and giving it to a friend, can have all sorts of benefits, including creating a sense of achievement as well as enabling a social relationship.

'The fragrance of a gardenia or a stephanotis, or the tactility of unusual plants such as living stones – all of these things help us engage with nature and have a positive impact on our minds, especially in a world where technology is all over us.'

Dr Adrian James, president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, agrees that engaging with nature and growing things, whether indoors or out in the garden, can be a really important part of both supporting wellbeing and helping recovery from mental illness. 'Mainstream treatments like talking therapies and medication are really important, but alongside them things such as horticultural activity and sport can also help,' he says.

Research shows that when people are surrounded by plants and nature it can improve levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, which in turn boosts self-esteem and a sense of wellbeing.

'It's about engaging with something where you can see a result,' says James. 'It's also about learning and improving your expertise. It's a social

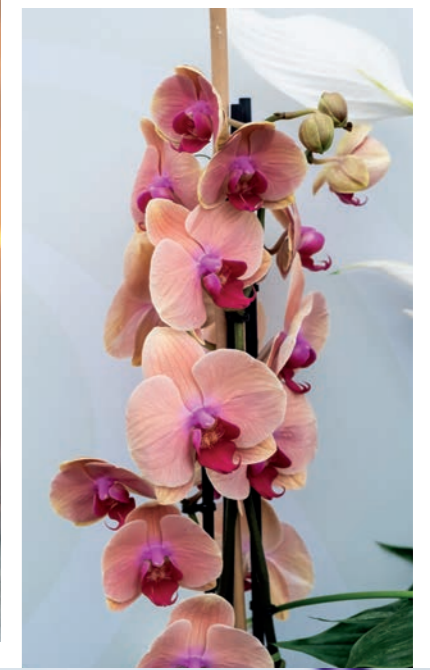
activity, either online or with other people, so that's important as well.'

Social media apps such as Instagram are flooded with images of people's houseplants, with a huge community joining in popular memes such as 'Monstera Monday'. The accessibility of them is key, because you don't need to have any outdoor space and many are quite affordable.

Tending to your indoor plants is also an easy way to counter the effects of working from home. 'Particularly in the past 18 months, when we've been online so much, you can spend from eight in the morning to eight in the evening looking at a screen. Having a plant lets you get away from that: have a little bit of a break, nurture it, feed it, water it and engage all of your senses. The more you use your senses the better it is for your mental wellbeing,' says James.

Gilchrist believes we need to start thinking about our interiors in the same way that we approach outside space. She and her team at The Edible Bus Stop are particularly interested in biophilia, literally 'love of life', the innate connection between humans and the natural world.

'We know that going for a walk in the woods or a park makes you feel better, so we're creating interior landscaping,' she says. 'There are physical benefits, such as reducing high blood pressure and speeding up post-operative recovery, but then there's also the fact that houseplants offer emotional and mental health >



PICTURES: JAMES LINSELL-CLARK/SWNS; RHS

Houseplant Studios were a new feature at Chelsea Flower Show this year. Designs included The Office, top, The Pharmacy of Houseplants, right, and Celebrate Autumn with Plants, below





Above: the Green Bathroom Retreat design at Chelsea won a silver medal. Left: the urn plant, *Aechmea fasciata*

support – they have been shown to help depression. I know, as someone who went through lockdown on my own, that they became my friends, and that you get a real sense of achievement when you've managed to keep them alive.'

There is evidence that houseplants can help to improve the air quality in our homes. A 2007 Australian study found that keeping three or more large plants per person in an office can clear the air of volatile harmful compounds by up to 75 per cent.

'On a physical level it's the CO₂,' says Gilchrist. 'They breathe in what we breathe out and we breathe in what they breathe out – that's the symbiotic relationship we have with plants and trees.'

When she has to snip bits off houseplants for a display she talks and sings to them. 'I say: "Oh, I'm sorry darling". I give them a little song. Then I give them a misting – I am convinced they love the misting.'

Pascale Duval, lead designer at The Edible Bus Stop, believes observing the tiny details of houseplants is highly beneficial. *Oxalis triangularis* and calatheas, also known as prayer plants, fold together at night as if they were praying then open up to the light during the day.

'It's those tiny details, those intricacies of the plant that you see day-to-day and look forward to. It's a recognition that you're not

completely alone. They are your friends – something for you to care for and tend,' says Duval.

She suggests novices should start with something easy such as succulents, which don't require much watering. 'For people starting the journey they're really easy to maintain. The quickest way to kill a houseplant is to overwater it. If you've got a plant that you know doesn't need much water, then that's a really good starting point.'

During lockdown people who had previously shown little interest in houseplants started not only collecting them but also taking cuttings to grow new plants.

Duval says: '*Monstera deliciosa* is an absolutely amazing starter plant. It's huge and architectural, and you can take cuttings from it really easily. Aside from the mental health benefits of having cuttings, again I'd go back to them being your friends, as you tend them and watch their roots grow. This is something you can do in your own home. It's addictive once you learn to propagate.'

The craze for taking cuttings has led to an update on the seed swap: the cuttings club.

'During lockdown people started little cuttings clubs, which was a great way to form a community of people who are like-minded. It's a fabulous way to create an instant friendship group,' says Gilchrist. ■

FIVE TOP TIPS FOR KEEPING HOUSEPLANTS HEALTHY

1 Right plant, right place. 'If you've got a plant that's a jungle floor-lover, don't put it on your windowsill because it will die – it won't like the sun on its leaves and it will just sulk,' says Kate Turner, a gardening guru at Miracle-Gro. 'If it comes from the jungle and likes humidity, so put it in your bathroom.'

2 Don't leave your houseplants standing in water. 'That is the worst thing you can do,' says Turner. 'One of the best things to do is called "drench then drought" – you soak it, then let it drain for maybe 10 minutes. You wait until it feels dry then you drench it again, drain, and leave it.'

3 Use tepid water. Don't ever water your plants with cold water. Fill up a jug the night before, leave it on the kitchen counter, then use it the next morning, which also helps to filter some of the chemicals out. Don't use boiled water as that concentrates any salts and chemicals in the water.

4 Houseplants hate draughts, they are one of the biggest killers. If you've got a plant that's sulking check to see if there is a draught, because that could be the reason.

5 Feed during the growing season. 'It's a really good idea to feed houseplants, but only during their growing season – spring to summer – and once every two weeks,' says Turner. 'I tend to dilute plant food a little bit more than the instructions say because you don't want to risk scorching the roots. Don't pour feed direct onto dry soil. Always make sure it is moist, the same as with garden plants.'