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Being Intentional with Wellness

Wendy Komancheck



Would you rather be in a sterile room with no plants or in a room full of lush greenery? For those of us in the horticultural world, we would respond with a room loaded with plants.

Plenty of studies have found that plants, including houseplants, provide relaxation, improve memory and cognition, and lift moods.

How COVID Revolutionized the Houseplant Trend

This most recent houseplant movement started around 2018, two years before COVID. However, the COVID epidemic kept people home and in their gardens. Likewise, all plant sales went through the roof, including houseplants.

“Regarding the healing power of plants and their impact on mental health, I think back to how the pandemic sparked my interest. I literally went from zero to 100 houseplants during that time,” said Paul Lee Cannon, a San Francisco Bay Area plant and garden stylist and owner of Paul-Lee-Nation.

Caring for plants became a meaningful project for Paul during COVID lockdown. “When I’m tending to a houseplant, I’m entirely focused on the task at hand,” he said. “I don’t think about anything else, so my stress levels drop. It’s truly therapeutic. Having my hands in the dirt or even talking to the plants has an immediate calming effect.”

Paul acquired most of his collection through community swaps, which offered the added perk of connecting with fellow enthusiasts. His hobby quickly evolved into a passion, inspiring him to launch a business specializing in houseplant care and small-space garden design.



Kathy Andrzejewski, a K-12 Educator at Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, and a horticultural therapist, has seen the same benefits in the studies she's read for her certification and in her work with students.

"It definitely impacts your health and well-being—it's been proven to lower blood pressure,; it's been known to improve your cognition; your ability to focus, your ability to breathe—because the plants put off all kinds of good things for us to breathe in. So it's psychologically correct," Kathy said.

The Nurturing Effect of Houseplants

Nurturing houseplants by feeding, watering and fertilizing them also promotes a sense of calm.

"I think it gives you a different sense when you walk into your home. I think working with plants … I need to repot plants, [and] I can't wait because I like digging in the dirt. I give the plants a new room and new pots … cleaning them, washing them. I know you feel like you're taking care of something and they're taking care of you, too, because it gives you purpose," said Lisa Steinkopf, the Houseplant Guru.

Lisa is the author of four houseplant books and understands the act of caring for plants can be beneficial. "You're helping them grow, keeping them clean, making sure they have the right light. You're touching the plants; you're digging in the soil—all those good things," Lisa said.

Kathy said she saw this nurturing effect when she worked at a senior care facility that planted a garden. She noticed the residents were engaged—even though the garden primarily served a sensory purpose. She also realized during her horticultural therapy classes that research supported the idea that even images of plants, or windows that let patients see the birds and plants growing, had a positive effect on them.

Kathy added there's also research supporting improvements in memory and focus among seniors with dementia. "Studies show that having plants nearby can increase memory retention. If you're in a space where you have living plants, not fake ones, it increases your creativity, concentration and focus," Kathy said.

Being Intentional With Time Around Plants

Kathy said she had to write prescriptions for people suffering from depression, anxiety and other mental health issues during her classes to become a horticultural therapist. She "prescribed" time with plants via activities like nature journaling, garden art or just time in nature for people with the goal of improving mental health or reducing anxiety because when they surrounded themselves with plants or went outside, it lifted their mood.

"Many research studies have focused on the cognitive benefits of plants on psychological anxiety, depression and dementia," she noted. "If you put up nature-oriented pictures or even reading quotes that are nature-oriented, [it] can boost mental wellness."

Costa Farms teamed up with the University of Florida to study the impact of horticultural therapy on students' well-being—particularly their psychological well-being.

"One of the things that a lot of students experience when they first go to college is loneliness. So we dug into how this horticultural therapy program might impact students' feelings of loneliness before and after engaging in horticultural therapy," said Justin Hancock, horticulturist at Costa Farms.

In this study, students voluntarily signed up for the program. They regularly participated in guided activities with plants. They also completed a survey before they started the program. Additionally, the students interacted with a horticultural therapist and were assigned projects, such as planting an herb garden. Then, at the end of the program, the students took the same survey they'd taken when joining the program to compare before-and-after results. Some of the questions included:

Do I feel connected to other people?

Do I feel in tune with the people around me?

Justin shared common responses to these questions included that students felt isolated and like outsiders. However, the survey results after horticultural therapy showed improvements in connecting with others and reducing loneliness. The study also found that students added more houseplants to their collections, whether through plant swaps or purchases.

"A sense of connection there that we can lean into based on the fact that once they [the students] have some plants, they purchased significantly more or they acquired significantly more. We don't necessarily know if they purchased, if they were gifted or traded," Justin said. "It's another piece of the puzzle; it's more supporting evidence that plants are really good for us. We need to have them around, especially in environments that can be sterile, like a dorm room. Being able to have plants on the windowsill changes the effect of the space so much."

Bringing Wellness to the Garden Center

You can promote wellness by stocking easy-to-care-for plants—such as ZZ Plants, snake plants and others—for newbie plant parents, as well as ancillary products like watering cans, fertilizer, soil, interesting pots and plant lights to help people become successful plant parents.

Lisa's family owns Steinkopf Nursery in Farmington Hills, Michigan, which has a small garden center. Lisa shared ideas for stocking and selling houseplants to customers.

"You want as many plants as you can get, but if a company has a good line of fertilizer, pots and soil, they don't need every single thing. I don't think you need every single fertilizer or every single potting mix. It's nice to have an African violet potting mix, a cactus potting mix, a tropical potting mix and a citrus one. I think it is good to have a variety of soils made for specific plants," Lisa said.

As an IGC, you can be part of the wellness movement, connecting people with houseplants. Set up a wellness area with plants in interesting containers, and even a seating area with plants surrounding it. You'll find people wanting to be in your shop, soaking up the good vibes that houseplants bring them … and, hopefully, you'll get a bump in sales as well. **GP**

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For More Information

PaulLeeNation.com | theHouseplantGuru.com

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