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House Plants: What Your Grandmother Never Told You

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It is an interesting phenomenon that in every store that sells home goods there are now shelves of potted plastic plants. They are even quite botanically correct in a lot of cases, but they continue to be lifeless representations of the real thing. We seem to be craving nature in our homes but are looking for quick fixes that ultimately lack what we really need.

What we could be doing with little more effort is to be searching out the real thing. Live plants can be found in our supermarkets, big box stores, and nurseries. Our reticence seems to lie in the fear that they would take more of our busy time, that they would take research into how to care for them, or in the concern that they would ultimately die from lack of attention. The truth is that many houseplants require little care and maintenance and the rewards are far greater than the weekly dusting of the fake plastic ones. Studies have shown that having live plants in our home environment can boost our mood, calm our nerves, reduce stress level, increase attention span, and even (to a small but valuable extent) detoxify the air in our surroundings. Consider how you look out the window at nature for a break from your work day to rest your eyes and to take a few deep breaths. Nature is an integral and vital part of our lives. So put that artificial plant in some dark corner where no real plant could live and head off to find some natural beauties to cheer up your life.

If you are a novice at having houseplants you should head to a store or nursery that has experts to help you select the perfect plant. Before you go think about where you would want a plant to live in your house, how big or small the area is, and how much light that area gets and when the light is brightest there during the day. Start with a plant that looks healthy and green and one that can remain in its current pot for a few months. That will give the plant a chance to acclimate before it

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has to go through the stress of being repotted. If all this sounds like the extra work you've been dreading, remember that this is a onetime event and it will make you the expert when you go to buy another. Also remember that plants are very adaptable and will make every effort to live under your care.

If you are looking for a very forgiving plant, one that will live with some benign neglect, try any of these: Aloe plant (genus Aloe with many varieties), Spider plant (*Chlorophytum comosum*), Cast-iron plant (*Aspidistra elatior*), Philodendron (Araceae, many varieties), or Pothos plant (*Epipremnum aureum*). This list gives you a variety of leaf shapes, colors, and plant sizes. If you have a pet that might be inclined to munch on a plant, be sure the plant you choose is nontoxic.

The desire to have plants that clear the air of pollutants goes into a more scientific area, which would require a lot more space to explain. Plant studies show that some plants can clean the environment of formaldehyde, benzene, trichloroethylene, and carbon monoxide. However, your house has a large air space and a small plant would be ineffective in cleaning such a big area. Plants that have been studied and found to be useful include: Bamboo palm (Arecaceae family), Mother in Law's Tongue (*Sansevieria trifasciata*), Peace lily (*Spathiphyllum wallisii*), and the Spider plant (*Chlorophytum comosum*).

Remember, your goal is to find a plant that you enjoy looking at, feels right in your environment, and makes you happy to have in your home. Your grandmother or great aunt probably had plants in their house and loved and enjoyed them without knowing all of the scientific studies involved. You can do the same or get involved in studying more on the subject. It's up to you.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512), or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information and days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.