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Greening the Workplace

By Joseph Vess

Hardy plants that look great and may work wonders at the office



*Natural screen: A healthy stand of the desert tropical *Zamioculcas zamiifolia* acts as a screen in an office setting; a hardy jade plant sits on the desk.
credit: Plants for People*

It may be time to give some respect to that tired ficus gathering dust in the corner of your office reception area. According to a number of studies, office plants not only improve the air you breathe, they may also make you a happier, less-stressed and more creative worker.

That's what the landscape industry is pushing, anyway. Its Plants at Work campaign, introduced in 2001, promotes interior landscaping as a means to attract and retain employees and tenants, improve workers' morale and reduce sick days. The group, along with companies that have a stake in selling more plants, such as the Society of American Florists and Initial Tropical Plants, the big commercial landscape specialist in Riverwoods, Ill., have helped underwrite and promote studies that bolster the economic argument for plants.

For whatever reason, more businesses seem to be bringing foliage of all sorts into the office.

"I've seen a marked increase in plant material uses on the part of commercial buildings, says Chris Romandi, a certified landscape professional and president of Romandi Horticultural Group, Ho-Ho-Kus, N.J. "Plants offer a lot of bottom-line benefits for our clients."

But Romandi says most building managers who call him aren't thinking about clean air, boosting their employees' spirits or even increasing productivity. They just want to create an environment that is professional and inviting for workers and customers alike.

"The vast majority of the time that is why they're calling us," Romandi said. "They want to improve the aesthetics of their building."

A close second reason they call is problems with what Romandi calls "traffic flow." Companies want to figure out how to use plants to create a corridor or barrier in an office building, or even to find a plant to put on top of a file cabinet so employees don't pile papers there.

Workers who decide their own cubicles could use a bit of green – to help them breathe easier, to hide the stack of pending paperwork or simply to



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create a more inviting deskscape – should focus on tolerant plants that are happy in low-light, indoor conditions. Here are some popular options, provided by Kate Sadowski, horticulturist with the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe, Ill.:

Small trees: Chinese evergreen, dwarf date palm, bamboo palm, yellow palm

Potted green plants: English ivy, Boston fern, rubber plants, all philodendrons but especially the heart leaf, split leaf and the quirky Swiss cheese variety, with big leaves that develop big holes naturally

Potted flowering plants: cornflower, peace lily, hibiscus, moth orchid

The key to keeping your plants happy (recall that sickly ficus tree in the lobby?) is attention. Evaluate what the plant is and what it likes, what kind of conditions it prefers, Sadowski says, and make sure the plant is thriving. If the leaves start to burn, it's getting too much light; if they wilt, it's not getting enough. Keep an eye on it.

Below: Plants at work: Two spiky rush plants (Juncus sp.), a lucky bamboo (Dracaena sanderiana) in the corner of the room and two Podocarpus maki. credit: Plants for People



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