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Your Amazing In-depth Guide for August

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# 10 INDOOR PLANTS TO TACKLE TOXIC SUBSTANCES

Our homes play host to an array of harmful synthetic chemical substances, which pollute the indoor atmosphere. Could plants be part of the solution to this health hazard? Dawn Mellowship looks at the many benefits of bringing foliage into our homes.

**H**ome sweet home? Perhaps not, chances are if you live in the Western world your house plays host to toxic air pollution, thanks to furniture, household cleaning products, air fresheners, perfumes, hair sprays, shoe polish and other household items laced with cocktails of synthetic chemicals that contaminate our indoor atmosphere by releasing harmful gases or particles into the air. Industrialisation and urbanisation of the Western World has cut us off from nature and imbued the

environment with thousands of hazardous synthetic chemicals. If you work in an office, the indoor environment will unlikely fare any better. Printers, copiers, computer monitors, floor coverings, paint and wallpaper release harmful substances into the indoor atmosphere. According to The Healthy Plants in the Workplace Campaign a third of all modern office buildings in Europe have an inadequate indoor climate, and as a consequence illness-related absence is much higher in these buildings. You will likely be

spending between 80% and 90% of your time indoors and our modern-day energy-efficient, tightly sealed homes, keep the undesirable substances firmly inside, leading to increased allergic reactions, along with a myriad of other health problems such as migraines, fatigue, dizziness, multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS), sick-building syndrome and skin, eye and respiratory irritation.

In 1983 the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency detected over 350 volatile organic compounds in five different

**1 Areca Palm (Chrysalidocarpus Lutescens)** A bushy palm that releases a great deal of moisture into the air and is rated amongst the best for removing all indoor toxins tested.\* **Maintenance:** Likes lots of watering during the summer months, moderate to bright light and average warmth. If stems die remove quickly to prevent rot from infecting other healthy stems. Don't allow the plant to sit in water or the root may rot.



**2 Bamboo Palm (Chamaedorea Erumpens)** Easy to care for and fantastic for adding moisture to the indoor atmosphere. Also one of the top-rated plants for the removal of benzene, trichloroethylene and formaldehyde.\* **Maintenance:** Likes to be kept in low to medium light in rich, fibrous well-drained and moist soil. It is prone to spider mites in dry, heated areas.



**3 Boston Fern (Nephrolepis Exaltata Bostoniensis)** One of the most popular varieties of fern, the Boston Fern is particularly good at removing air pollutants such as formaldehyde, and humidifying the air.\* **Maintenance:** Happiest in indirect sunlight with plenty of humidity and moderate temperatures. It's best not to leave the Boston Fern to its own devices, it likes plenty of misting and watering or the



leaves will decay. Ensure that the soil remains moist but don't flood it with water.

**4 Date Palm (Phoenix Canariensis)** This slow glowing palm is one of the best palms for removing indoor air pollutants, particularly xylene.\* **Maintenance:** This palm's a toughy and can cope with full sunlight (although best kept in semi-sunlight) and low overnight temperatures. It can last for decades in an



appropriate environment. Water regularly during the summer months and don't allow it to sit in water.

**5 Elephant Ear Philodendron (Philodendron Domesticum)** Also known as spade leaf philodendron, this plant with fairly large heart-shaped leaves is great for removing formaldehyde. **Maintenance:** Easy to care for. Grows best in moderate temperatures and light. Allow to dry between waterings.





## The Healing Power of Plants

### Plants...

- Absorb harmful substances
- Humidify the air (low humidity can cause dryness of the mouth, a block nose and skin and eye irritation).
- Reduce stress levels.
- Enhance worker productivity in the workplace.
- Filter dirt and dust from the air.
- Have a cooling effect.
- Raise people's mood.
- Absorb Noise.



There are numerous ways in which we can improve the quality of our indoor atmosphere and one very simple step we can all take is to literally turn our home into a forest. Reportedly household plants, as well as furnishing us with oxygen in exchange for our carbon dioxide, also take in other chemical compounds in the air, through minute openings on the leaves. Plants also increase indoor humidity by releasing moisture into the air, absorb noise and may act as natural dust filters, collecting dust on their leaves and reducing airborne dust particles in interior environments.<sup>2</sup> By these mechanisms they may offer health benefits to counteract the negative effects of volatile organic compounds and dust in our indoor environment. NASA research has found that common household plants such as spider plant, philodendron and golden pothos reduce the levels of indoor pollutants, including: formaldehyde, benzene and carbon monoxide.<sup>3</sup>

If that wasn't enough to convince you to set up a mini indoor Eden Project, researchers have discovered that simply observing vegetation can reduce stress-levels (indicated

by physiological measures such as decreased blood pressure) and increase worker productivity in internal work spaces such as offices. One hospital study demonstrated that absence from work due to illness could be decreased from 15% to 5% within six months, when plants were placed in close proximity to workers' computer monitors.<sup>4</sup> Plants have been shown to reduce fatigue, headache, coughing and irritation of the eyes by 30%.<sup>5</sup>

So what are you waiting for? Fill your home with plants that tackle toxics! You don't even need to take a trip to your local gardening centre. Houseofplants.co.uk and Indoor-plants.co.uk sell a range of houseplants for home delivery. The following ten plants have all been evaluated for their ecological benefits.

1,2 Wolverton, B.C., Ph.D., *Houseplants, Indoor Air Pollutants, and Allergic Reactions*, National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) National Space Technology Laboratories, 1986.

3 Lohr, I., *Particulate Matter Accumulation on Horizontal Surfaces in Interiors: Influence of Foliage Plants*, Atmospheric Environment, 1996;30(14):2565-2568.

4 *Feeling at Home in the Workplace: The Advantages of Plants in the Office*, NIGZ Division Work and Health, November 2004.

5 *Healthy Plants in the Workplace*, online at: [www.healthygreenatwork.org](http://www.healthygreenatwork.org).

locations in a Washington, DC home for the elderly.<sup>1</sup> Since then, other researchers have also found traces of toxic chemicals in indoor environments. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) have been aware of the problem of indoor air pollution associated with closed structures in outer space since 1973, but it is only fairly recently that governments and industry made any kind of effort to look into making buildings more environmentally and health friendly.



### 6 Janet Craig Dracaena (Dracaena Deremensis 'Janet Craig')

A wonderfully tall plant with long, glossy leaves, the Janet Craig Dracaena is one of the best plants for removing trichloroethylene.\* **Maintenance:** Keep in low to medium light (avoid full sunlight) in average warmth. Water once every two weeks, or when dry. Do not let the compost dry out. Mist regularly to keep up humidity and place in a pebble tray.

### 7 Mother-in-Law's Tongue (Sansevieria Trifasciata)

With spiky, prongy leaves, it's no wonder this plant is known as Mother-in-Law's Tongue. It looks great with contemporary interiors, humidifies the air and is great for removing formaldehyde. **Maintenance:** Copes well in low light and moderate temperatures. Requires little watering. Allow to dry in between waterings.



### 8 Peace Lilly (Spathiphyllum)

The Peace Lilly is not only beautiful, bearing dark green leaves and a white spathe flower, but also fantastic at removing alcohols, acetone, trichloroethylene, benzene and formaldehyde.\* **Maintenance:** Copes well in low light, although grows best in bright indirect light and warm temperatures. Avoid intense exposure to sunlight as it can cause wilting, and regularly wash the leaves.



### 9 Rubber Plant (Ficus Robusta)

Of ficus plants tested, the rubber plant is the most effective at removing chemical toxins from the indoor environment, and particularly effective at removing formaldehyde.\* **Maintenance:** Will tolerate low light and cool temperatures. Requires plenty of water (about once every two weeks), but wait to re-water until the top of the compost is dry. The leaves should be upright. If they are



drooping it's a sign that the plant is being overwatered.

### 10 Spider Plant (Chlorophytum Comosum)

This fast growing plant removes carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides and xylene from the indoor atmosphere. **Maintenance:** Easy to maintain and very fast growing. Keep away from direct midday sunlight and ensure that the compost remains moist.



\* Source: *Health Plants in the Workplace Campaign* (Financed with the Support of the European Union). For more information on the health benefits of plants see [Healthygreenatwork.org](http://Healthygreenatwork.org).