



PLANTS AND TECHNOLOGY: The Odd Couple

It seems the deeper we get into technology, the further we get from our roots . . . the roots that keep us healthy . . . the roots that nurture our imaginations, our very souls.

Generally, the environment of an IT department is not conducive to optimum staff productivity. The lights are kept low; people stare intently into computer screens, download databases,



Illustration: Brenna Johnson

and communicate through their fingertips rather than face to face. Today, it's inter-face.

The truth is, the deeper we get into technology, the greater our need for an effective interior plantscape. Why? Computers spew out chemically ridden gases that invade our bodies, both through breathing them in and through skin absorption.

In his research, Dr. Bill Wolverton—the NASA scientist who first discovered and measured the toxins circulating in the HVAC (Heat, Ventilation, Air Conditioning) systems that run our buildings' air intakes—indicates the top pollutants in homes and offices are from copying machines, computers, and laser printers, as well as solvent-based office supplies. They all emit volatile chemicals.

If your office or home is energy-efficient and using recycled air, the chemicals in the air are not being replaced by fresh outside air. "But even if we had no products that pollute," says Dr. Wolverton, "people pollute and the air becomes stagnant."

The effective installation of plants can significantly lower workplace stress, decrease fatigue, and improve productivity and accuracy.

The basis of his research has its roots in experiments designed for the NASA space program. One of the problems with manned space missions is the control of air quality in a totally sealed, recirculating air system. NASA researchers discovered that the synthetic materials inside Skylab emitted more than 100 chemicals. The space craft was, in effect, the ultimate in Sick Building Syndrome.

It was a short step to realizing that the same problems are encountered in air-conditioned buildings packed with technology. That type of environment can lead to depression, anxieties, and health issues—which all contribute to lowered productivity.

To determine people's physical responses to plants, many studies have measured blood pressure, muscle tension, heart rate, skin temperature, and reaction time.

- Plants consistently help reduce complaints of fatigue; headache; dry itchy skin; and eye, nose, and throat irritations.
- The effective installation of plants can significantly lower workplace stress, decrease fatigue, and improve productivity and accuracy. Recent studies have confirmed that interior plants enhance worker productivity by 12 percent. They also contribute to lower absenteeism.

A professional plantscaper will recommend the correct species and varieties for best performance in low-light areas. Ongoing, dedicated maintenance by trained horticultural technicians—using our “secret weapons” in the watering and care processes—can help keep plants vibrant and thriving in even the most challenging environments.

As we continue forward in our relationship with technology, plants will no longer be seen as a “luxury” but as a necessity for the employees’ well-being and the health of the workplace. A qualified, professional plantscaper can not only help in choosing the right plant for every location, he or she can suggest discreet, supplemental lighting and assist in resolving design issues.

The cost of professionally tended interior plants is easily recovered by increased productivity, increased employee retention, an enhanced corporate image, reduction in sick days, and a substantial reduction in employee complaints.

Technology has made our lives interesting, to say the least. Whilst we soar through cyberspace, we must remember that our roots keep us anchored to the true reality: we cannot live on this planet without our trees and plants. We must support our workplace environments with healthy, vibrant interior plantscapes. ▲

Gail Hirst, a professional plantscaper for 28 years, consults on the design, sales, and service aspects of her industry in Vancouver, BC.

Voice: 604 984-6341