Indoor air quality and plants? [1]

Dear Alice,

I once saw a list of plants that were helpful in cleaning air CO₂ and other toxins. Do you know this list? Or, where I should look for it?

Gasping for Breath

Answer

Dear Gasping for Breath,

Unless you have a really big home, and you are prepared to convert it into something resembling the Amazon, you might not want to rely on a few pretty houseplants to clean up carbon dioxide (CO₂) and other indoor air pollutants. In 1991, NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) conducted a study to determine the extent to which plants acted as indoor air filters. Indeed, plants do reduce CO₂ levels, but scientists concluded that it would take about 680 plants to do the trick in an average sized home. Since this study was conducted in 1991, there have been no other scientific research findings linking plants to decreased CO₂ levels. The reports and lists that you have come across are most likely based on this one study.

All botany aside, there are still great ways to improve indoor air quality. First, there is source control. Source control is about eliminating or reducing sources of air pollution like asbestos or gas from the stove: Asbestos can be sealed off and stoves that use natural gas can be adjusted to decrease the amount of pollutants released. Second, increasing ventilation (by opening windows and doors, using window fans and window air conditioning units) can also help decrease the concentration of CO₂ and other pollutants. Finally, there are air cleaners and filters. There are a variety of air cleaners to choose from including tabletop models and whole house systems. These machines vary widely in price, efficiency, and cost. So you may want to check out the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) recommendations about specific devices before you make a purchase. If you have specific questions or concerns about air quality or safety in your workplace [3] you may want to visit the Centers for Disease Control [4] or the Occupational Safety and Health Administrations [5] websites.

Even though plants might not be the best way to keep indoor air clean, they can still go a long way to give your home or office a little touch of natural beauty.

Alice!
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