

Botanical artistry

Denise Godfrey joined her family's San Diego County business as a young adult after she realized how much she enjoys being around plants.

In the age of COVID, plants brighten indoor spaces

Story by Kevin Hecteman • Photos by Rob Andrew

Denise Godfrey manufactures air purifiers. Not the kind that need to be plugged in—the kind that need to be watered.

Godfrey helps her parents run Olive Hill Greenhouses in Fallbrook, from which a wide and many-hued variety of plants are sent forth to help brighten homes, home offices, commercial offices and many other indoor spaces with the intention of bringing pleasure to the eye and to the lungs. Tony and Sue Godfrey founded Olive Hill in 1973; Denise, their daughter, went to work for them in 2000.

“I really enjoyed being around plants,” she said. “Having met quite a few customers with my dad, I realized it was a good business and there were some really nice people.”

Anthuriums and bromeliads—flowering plants with tropical roots—are Olive Hill’s two main varieties, grown in a staggering array of shapes and colors. They can do more than just take carbon dioxide out of the air, Godfrey said.

“By bringing houseplants into your home, it’s providing that nice setting where you just really feel good and have that psychological benefit of being around living things in your home or in your office when you spend so much time inside,” she said.

This house needs plants

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic nearly two years ago meant people were spending more time at home—and soon, they were spending more money on the home.

“It was really fascinating to see that there are a lot of people that, before COVID, didn’t have any houseplants, and then all of a sudden, they had like 50 houseplants in a matter of a couple of months,” Godfrey said. “In an attempt to construct the indoor environment, people were looking for things that were of interest to the eye: like a good piece of art—how it triggers that reaction where you really start thinking about it or you just get lost looking at the painting.”

That botanical artistry can manifest itself in a variety of colors, such as the many hues of anthuriums Godfrey grows; they come in shades of red, pink and white. Many of her plants also feature variegated, or multicolored, leaves and stems.

“I think my favorites are the ones that just have a lot of botanical interest in them,” Godfrey said, adding the calathea makoyana reminds her of a mosaic from Roman times, with chartreuse tiles and darker green lines between those tiles.

There are as many ideal indoor plants as there are people, Godfrey noted. For example, some people like plants with big leaves while others are attracted to interesting symmetry or variegations.

“Just like there isn’t one style of art that speaks to everybody, there isn’t one plant that speaks to everybody,” she said. “It’s a form of self-expression.”

Growing interest

At Folsom-based Green Acres, which has nurseries in and around Sacramento, the houseplant business grew to the point that the nursery needed a houseplant merchandiser. Mary Bettencourt, a longtime store manager, was promoted into the post and found herself dealing with a 40% uptick in houseplant sales; nearly half the buyers were first-timers, she noted. They weren’t picky.

“A lot of people had to stay at home and so they pretty much wanted anything,” Bettencourt said. Soon though, because people were home, they were able to better care for their plants, leading them to focus on ficus varieties, philodendrons, calatheas and the like.

“They had more time to spend looking at the inside



Denise Godfrey looks over the calathea makoyana plants at Olive Hill Greenhouses with Benjamin Romero. She says the plant reminds her of “a mosaic that you might see in Roman times.”

of their house and they wanted things that were different,” Bettencourt said. “Some of them wanted air-purifying plants—all of them are really air-purifying plants. They wanted some hanging plants; they wanted some tall plants. It was all over the place, but a lot of them wanted some rare varieties.” These include hoyas or alocasias, tropical plants originating from Asia.

Varying tastes and levels of interest are reasons Godfrey prefers not to get on the “trend” bandwagon.

“I hate to have a situation where we’re saying, ‘Oh, these plants are trending.’ The plant purchase is such a personal purchase.”

Clearing the air

Back in 1989, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration studied whether certain indoor plants could act as natural air purifiers, with an eye toward cleaning the air in space stations. The NASA Clean Air Study found that some plants, such as peace lilies and dracaenas, might be effective at removing volatile organic compounds such as benzene and formaldehyde from indoor air. (Subsequent studies have suggested that

more research is needed.)

“Peace lilies and pothos are usually ones that do a good job of fixing all the organic chemicals and then using those chemicals and the metabolism of the plant to change it into something else, and improving the environment,” Godfrey said.

Volatile organic compounds are emitted as gases from certain solids or liquids, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Many of these compounds are found in household products, building materials and furnishings, and office equipment. Indoor concentration of such compounds can be as much as 10 times higher than outdoors, according to the EPA.

Plant parenting 101

If this is all new to you, Godfrey suggests taking a plant personality test to find out what best matches your persona and lifestyle (punch “plant personality test” into your favorite search engine and multiple options will come up).

Bettencourt recommends doing some homework before going to the nursery. Buyers “need to know what



Evaristo Vargas, top, tends to plants at Olive Hill. Anthuriums, above, are among the company’s most popular plants. Alocasia African mask, below, is one of many variegated options capturing people’s fancy.





Catalino Lopez, above, transplants rex begonias in the greenhouse. Bromeliads line a long table, right, with dracaena sun ray plants in hanging baskets above.



How not to kill your new plant

For starters, please don't drown the poor thing. Overwatering is indeed the No. 1 rookie mistake new plant parents make, said Sacramento-area plant expert Mary Bettencourt. Underwatering is right up there, too, along with too much fertilizer, putting the plant directly under a heating or air-conditioning vent, and insufficient light. Or too much light. Bettencourt said she's heard from customers with burned plants.

"They put it right in the window, and it's a south-facing window, and there's sunlight coming in," Bettencourt said. "Burns plants like a magnifying glass." Bettencourt also recommends holding off on moving the plant to a new pot. "A lot of them want to repot them right away. We tell them not to. In fact, we really do recommend, when they take the plant home, not to repot it for at least three or four months. Let it acclimate to your environment."

When you do repot the plant, Bettencourt said smaller is better. "They think the bigger the pot, the bigger it will grow," Bettencourt said. "We recommend one size up when they're repotting, because if you get too big of a pot, you just have too much moisture that'll stay in the soil and therefore will usually drown the plant."

area of the house or office they want to place it," she said. "They need to know what the lighting is." Also: "How tall do you want it? Do you want trailing plants? What's the pot size? What are the water needs? Are there any pet issues?"

New plant owners might want to look at what Bettencourt calls "starter plants," such as pothos or peace lily, which are more forgiving if you forget to water for a day or two. She also recommends gauging how often you're home. Two plants she suggests for busy people: sansevieria and dracaenas, each of which can stand varying light levels and need not be—indeed, should not be—watered every day.

"You want plants like that so that you're not failing at being a plant parent," Bettencourt said. "People don't want to fail and we don't want them to fail, either. That's why education is so important."

Godfrey stressed the importance of checking moisture levels in the soil, along with light and temperature levels, before filling up the watering can.

"As you get into higher temperatures and higher light levels, the plant is going to be more metabolically active," Godfrey said. "If it's cooler and darker, the plant


isn't photosynthesizing as much, and so it's not going to need as much water."

Looking ahead

Bettencourt said she expects 2022 to look a lot like 2021, to an extent—while the rare-plant fans will still be out there, she also sees people who have gone back to the office or changed jobs and adjusted their interests accordingly.

"I think the trend is going to be that they're going to now want plants that are easier to take care of because they are back to work," Bettencourt said.

Godfrey said she thinks the pandemic prompted "rethinking of what's important in different types of relationships."

"I don't think that connection of plants is going away," she said. "I think it's going to really stay with us—the importance of having some life in your home and being able to really enjoy that at night when you're inside." 

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