

Good Plants for Bad Places – the Sturdy Seven

By Master Gardener Jackie Fairbarns

February 2022

Hello, fellow gardeners. Here, in the later part of winter, our gardening efforts are still mostly confined to indoors. Our lovingly tended houseplants are providing the green growing challenges we will soon be facing in the great out of doors. Did you know that research suggests that looking after a house plant can actually help manage your blood pressure? Did you know that NASA research shows that some house plants are very good at removing specific toxins from the air? If you are interested, you can check out the NASA Clean Air Study on the NASA website. (<https://ntrs.nasa.gov/citations/20080003913>) Sadly, some folks have mentioned that all their house plants die, so they have given up growing them.

Of course, there are no plants we know of, other than mildew or mushrooms, that will grow in a dungeon, with or without dragons, or in a dark basement. But with a modicum of planning, you can find a plant that will add life and beauty to almost any spot – and maybe improve your air quality at the same time.

Choosing the right plant for the right spot will give the most confirmed non-green-thumbed a sense of accomplishment, so let's consider some possibilities. The following **seven sturdy plants** will all give a spot of healthy green and maybe even a touch of sophistication with just a little bit of attention – maybe say hello to them every day and feel free to name them. Generally, if grown in less than ideal conditions, they will not give you flowers. For those, you really do have to pay attention to feeding, watering and location. Of course, you can always stick in a few fake flowers if you really must.

All these plants have been around for a long time, and have earned their place in our indoor spaces. They all absorb carbon dioxide and produce oxygen; none will grow in absolute darkness and they all need an occasional drink, but none will go into a terminal snit if you forget to water for a few days. Bear in mind that most plants need less watering in the winter and a little more during the growing season. A bath in the shower a couple of times a year will help keep the leaves clean and healthy.



First in our sturdy seven, we consider the **Aglaonema**, a workhorse of the plant world. It is also known as the **Chinese Evergreen** (although it is actually native to the Philippines). It is a widely available tropical plant; it will survive some neglect and the silver variegated varieties are quite attractive. The all-green varieties will survive in low-light situations, and they all tolerate a wide range of temperatures (down to 50 degrees F.). They will appreciate a light misting once in a while. The plant grows slowly and it will be happy in the

same pot for a couple of years. Interesting to note, the **Chinese Evergreen** not only filters out a variety of indoor air pollutants, but becomes more efficient as it ages and is exposed longer.

Aspidistra, an evergreen with a tough disposition, has long, shiny, dark green leaves and has earned its nickname “cast iron plant” for its ability to tolerate poor growing conditions, including the dry air in most homes. A variegated variety has white markings, and, as with most colorful plants, appreciates a little more light than the dark green varieties, but not direct sunlight. It grows slowly, so you can put off repotting for several years.



The **Chlorophytum** or **spider plant** or airplane plant has long, white-striped leaves, up to 16 inches long that spread out like a daddy longlegs spider. It puts out long, wiry stems lined with small white flowers or miniature plants, just like the parent. These can be detached and easily rooted. It will stay happy for several years in the same pot. According to the NASA study, spider plants are very good at removing carbon dioxide and formaldehyde from the air. A

hanging basket in a well lighted spot (not direct sun) suits this plant and shows off its cascading growth habit. Be sure you can reach it for watering when the soil gets dry.



This spider plant perches happily on top a china cabinet. Several of its miniature plants are ready to be rooted & potted up separately.

Dracaena, sometimes called corn plant, is the one if you need a really tall plant for a dim corner. As a young plant, it does resemble corn with its long sword shaped leaves and dark green color. There are many varieties that have silver, gold or red leaf margins and some have very narrow leaves. To keep them the height you like, just cut off the top twelve inches or so and root it in water to start a new plant.

*A collection of **dracaenas** is grouped in a stair landing. In order to keep them the right size for the location, tops are regularly removed and rooted to make new plants.*



New shoots will also grow from the old plant below the cut. **Dracaena** is a tough plant and is one of the top air cleaners identified in the NASA study.

*In addition to dark green, **dracaena** leaves come in several varieties of stripe. Dry air can cause leaf tips to turn brown. Use scissors to trim off the brown tips and retain leaf shape.*



Heart leaved **Philodendrons** are undemanding, fairly rapid growing climbing plants, with shiny, heart shaped leaves. The vines can get very long, but it can be shaped easily by pinching and by growing on a form or pole. Cuttings root readily and can be grown for quite a while in water alone. NASA reported that philodendrons are good at removing formaldehyde from the air. **A word of caution - this plant is toxic when eaten, so if you have children or pets it would not be a good choice.**



The philodendron grows long vines. Rather than let them trail or climb, here they are wound around the top of the pot and around each other. There are four vines in this pot, growing in the corner of a bathroom.

Spathiphyllum or peace lily is usually grown for its fragrant flowers, but when in a spot not conducive to flower production, it is still an attractive green plant with shiny, thin, lance shaped leaves. It actually prefers low light conditions and will let you know when it needs a drink by wilting. It was at the top of NASA's list for removing five common indoor air pollutants, especially those associated with harsh cleaning products. **A word of caution for this one also; its leaves are toxic to people and pets.**

*Doing double duty as ornament and room divider, this **spathiphyllum** occupies a space between kitchen and living room. It is reaching the point where it needs to be*



Sanseveria, also known as snake plant and mother-in-law's tongue or bowstring hemp, has a tall straight profile and its stiff leaves can grow to five feet tall. There is a dwarf variety that reaches only 4 inches high. A desert native, it can tolerate low light, sparse watering and dry air. A mature plant might produce spikes of fragrant flowers even in poor conditions. The tall leaves are edged in gold with pale cross-banding. Unlike the other plants we are talking about here, the **Sanseveria** releases oxygen at night, making it a good plant for sleeping spaces. It is also good at filtering out odors, making it a good choice for a bathroom.

*Reaching for the ceiling in a bathroom corner, the **sanseveria** is a striking accent while contributing to good air quality. Offshoots are easily rooted, but plants from leaf cuttings will not have the characteristic markings. Plant this one in a heavy pot as it might topple over.*



As a bonus, I present ***Kalanchoe daigremontianum*** or Mother of thousands. I am including this one because anyone can grow it and because I just like to say that name. It is not particularly beautiful, but the juvenile form is interesting and it has the ability to produce plantlets along the edges or tips of its narrow leaves. The plant is a succulent, growing to maybe two feet in height, with purple blotches on the leaf undersides. It needs good light, but not direct sun. It is not too picky about watering – but do remember that every living thing needs water now and then.

When it gets unappealingly tall and leggy,

remove a couple of the little plantlets before they develop roots and pot them up separately – put the old plant in the compost.

All these plants are readily available commercially. And, all are easily grown from cuttings or offsets. Perhaps a friend will share one with you. If one does not work for you, try another. There is an amiable, sturdy green plant for everyone!

The Heart of Virginia Master Gardeners Association and the Virginia Cooperative Extension Service are great sources of information and help on growing things in general. They can help you with everything from testing your soil to repotting your house plants to selecting a flowering tree for your yard. This website (<https://hovmg.org>) has links to many resources to guide your gardening efforts (a particular boon for those of us whose thumbs are not green).

Also, now that Spring is just around the corner, look for announcements of plant sales sponsored by Master Gardeners and garden clubs. These sales are great places to find special plants and horticultural treasures and to get in-person help on growing them.

Meanwhile, fellow gardeners, keep on growing.

-end-

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/HeartofVirginiaMasterGardeners>

eMail: heartofvamg@gmail.com

