

# Connexion<sup>TM</sup>

## Grow with it

### The role of plants in health care facilities

By M.J. Gilhooley and Chris Rice



#### about the authors

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**N**o longer regarded as mere decorations, interior plants are now commonly used in health care settings across the country to improve people's physical, social and mental well-being. In addition, interior plants can positively affect the bottom line for many health care facilities.

#### Plants affect us mentally, physically

Studies have shown that plants can have pronounced psychological and physical effects on individuals in controlled settings. In 1984, Roger Ulrich, PhD, of Texas A&M University, showed that patients whose rooms overlooked vegetation recovered faster after gallbladder surgery and required less pain medication than patients without a view of nature. Preliminary results from similar studies with cardiac patients in

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intensive care units are consistent with these findings.<sup>1</sup>

Research shows that plants lower people's stress levels — thus the tendency to heal faster in their presence. In other studies, Ulrich and R. F. Simons demonstrated that views of plant life can lower blood pressure and reduce muscle tension, producing recovery from stress within four to six minutes.<sup>2</sup>

Relaxation helps patients heal. As these studies show, interior plants can promote a calming environment. Busy health care employees are likely to appreciate the stress-reducing qualities of indoor greenery, as well.

#### Interior plants create positive first impressions

First impressions are important, especially when a patient enters a medical setting. Studies from England's Oxford Brookes University show that indoor plants positively enhance perception and contribute to well-being. The same set of studies concludes that people perceive a building with interior plants as more welcoming and more relaxed. Other research reveals that people's perceptions of a building are less positive in the absence of plants.<sup>3</sup>

Plants, then, are likely to enhance patients' perceptions of their surroundings upon entering a health care facility. An interior viewed as welcoming and relaxing helps accelerate the healing process. The organization's employees are more likely to

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—John Ferry, MD

be satisfied with their working conditions.


Gardens have always offered relaxing environments in which sick, injured or stressed people can recover.

In 1990, University Hospitals of Cleveland created an interior, 20,000-square-foot palm atrium in an area that had contained an exterior courtyard attached to four major medical centers. The atrium boasts 11 large, in-ground plant beds with 70 varieties of palm, some soaring 30 feet.

“The atrium is a welcome respite from our cold Cleveland winters for both patients and employees,” says John Ferry, MD, senior vice president and general manager of medical and surgical services. “In the middle of University Hospitals of Cleveland, the atrium’s skylights and plants transport you to the middle of summer. This oasis lifts the spirits of everyone who is experiencing illness, as well as their caregivers.”

### **Nurture plants and your bottom line**

A health care facility perceived to promote faster healing may draw more patients. Employee retention levels may increase, as well: Workers who are more relaxed tend to be happier with their jobs.

Consider being one of a steadily increasing number of health care facilities that are improving their bottom lines by incorporating interior plants into their healing regimens. 

#### **notes**

1. Ulrich RS. View through a window may influence recovery from surgery. *Science* 1984;224:420-421.
2. Ulrich RS, Simons RF. Recovery from stress during exposure to everyday outdoor environments. 1986. In: Wineman J, Barnes R, Zimring C (eds.). *The cost of not knowing: Proceedings of the Seventeenth Annual Conference of the Environmental Design Research Association*. Environmental Design Research Association, Washington, D.C.
3. Stiles J. 1995. PhD thesis at Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, England.

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