

Getting back to nature

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It is common knowledge that plants have been shown to improve our psychological wellbeing and physical health. Looking after our mental wellbeing has become as important now in our current environment than ever before. Mental wellbeing does not have one definitive definition but can be interpreted in many ways; how we feel, how are we coping within our daily life, how we are coping with the ups and downs of the every day.



Psychological health benefits:

- Improved mood
- Reduced stress levels
- Increased productivity
- Improved attention span

Physical health benefits:

- Improved air quality
- Reduced blood pressure
- Reduced fatigue and headaches

In life, students can experience different stresses and worries both at university and at home. I live away from home in student accommodation with other people who I have never seen or met until I moved in. I study Genetics which can be a busy course especially in the third year with your project which needs to be researched in depth and written up, alongside constantly working on other modules with deadlines piling up. It can be hard to balance time to focus on everything, and breaks are needed. Having a plant in your room or around the house can be extremely beneficial as it encourages you to take a breath and focus on something else for a bit.

Personally, I have always been interested in plants but over the summer during lockdown, since my internship was cancelled and the world was a bit crazy, I had the

time to focus my mind and improve my mental health by working on my garden at home. It provided me with the opportunity to create a living wall which I have always loved the idea of. I went for a mixture of climbers, evergreens and flowering plants so it won't always look the same, it will change with the season.

If you don't think you can keep a plant alive there are a variety of different low maintenance house plants that can easily help solve this and are affordable. I currently have two on my windowsill and they are absolutely thriving.

A huge tip with any plant indoor or outdoor, would be to consider the importance of drainage. Excess water needs somewhere to go, this is why the majority of house plants die because people often over water them and they end up sitting in water, killing the roots. If you are planting outside put holes in the bottom of the planter. For indoor planters you can keep the plant in the plastic pot it has been bought in and then just place it into a nice ceramic pot you have found. This also allows you to remove the plant for easy watering. If the top of the soil feels dry try and get two inches into the soil to be sure it is dry before watering.

Here are 3 examples of low maintenance plants I own. It is best to buy your plant in person to check the health and condition. I recommend a little local independent plant shop called Roots located in Liverpool Bluecoat.

1. *Microsorium musifolium* = Crocodyllus



This particular plant got the name Crocodyllus due to the scaly reptilian pattern on the leaves. It requires a temperature around 18°C-23°C and high humidity; this can be achieved by misting but what I do is put the plant in the bathroom when the shower is on and I even water it with the shower head on a warm temperature to get the same affect. When this plant produces new leaves, they are tightly curled up and over time you can see it slowly unravelling.

2. *Pilea peperomioides* = Chinese money plant or friendship plant



Supposedly, this plant provides good fortune and abundance to their owners getting its name money plant due to the shape of the leaves being circular and flat looking like coins. But it is known that this plant is a productive air purifier. It prefers a temperature between 15°C-30°C. A normal room humidity is good for this plant so it doesn't need to be in the bathroom and simple watering under the tap is fine. As this plant matures it can lose the lower leaves and begin to look more like a tree. It can also be propagated later on in life so you can have plenty of luck. (Propagation is the process of creating a new plant from a cutting or by separating the plant during repotting.)

3. *Schlumbergera* = Christmas cactus



A low maintenance flowering plant, so called the Christmas cactus because it flowers late November to late January making it an ideal Christmas gift apparently living for hundred years. So far, I've had mine for three years and it is still going strong producing pink flowers that bud at the end. As the name also suggests it's a cactus, so not a lot of water needed during the winter but you can increase watering during summer months. This plant may need a bit of pruning if it starts drooping too much, most likely after a couple of years but fear not if you put the cuttings into some compost soil, in sun light and water sparingly it should take root within three to twelve weeks.

All of these plants aren't a fan of direct sunlight; it can burn the leaves so another tip is to turn them around throughout the day if where you have put them gets constant sunlight.

Even if they are not in direct sunlight, rotating allows even growth. Bonus, all the plants mentioned are nontoxic to humans, cats and dogs.

If these three plants aren't your style there are plenty out there, go into your local plant shop and ask questions as they are more than happy to help. Alternatively, there are many books, such as '*The little book of house plants and other greenery*' by Emma Sibley.

It is a fact that plants are also beneficial for the environment. Having plants in your garden will attract pollinators such as birds, insects, bees, butterflies etc. Besides the environmental importance of these amazing animals, they are also visually pleasing to watch in outdoor spaces.

At the University of Liverpool, we are very fortunate to have the Green Guild that enables students to get back to nature and help the environment. The Green Guild have a number of initiatives including beehives, fruit and vegetables growing on the guild roof, the living wall on the side of the guild. The Green Guild offer many opportunities that are advertised on social media throughout the year that students can get involved in, to help students get their hands dirty by planting or helping out with the beehives.



Now, I appreciate plants are not for everyone, but there are numerous alternative activities that help with personal wellbeing and mental health. Turning off your electronic devices, walking around campus or Sefton Park (I enjoy walking around the Royal Albert Dock if I want to get away), exercise, socialising via zoom, reading, listening to a podcast etc.

Most importantly it won't be perfect at first, but it is worth its weight in gold prioritising self-care and mental wellbeing. You just have to find activities and hobbies to fit around your lifestyle and interests. You may even discover more about yourself along the way! ■