

Empty and strange without plants

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To most of us, it's hard to imagine a home that has no plants at all. Why are plants so important? A new dissertation from Umeå University in Sweden provides insight into our relationship with potted plants in the home.

The dissertation *Life, Mood, and Meaning* deals with the relationship between humans and things, addressing the feelings of humans in relation to plants in the home. It shows how potted plants affect people's way of viewing their lives, their identity, and their space.

"These are big questions," says the ethnologist Clas Bergvall, author of the dissertation. "It is indeed a challenge to reflect upon them in terms of how we shape our homes. The challenge is all the greater since potted plants belong to the small, everyday things that are often overlooked in relation to the truly important items on the agenda."

Superficially speaking, potted plants have no indispensable function in a home. The fact that they are nevertheless found in virtually all homes is grounded in a feeling that a home is not a home without plants. Once in the home, plants come close to the everyday activities, feelings, and memories of the dwellers. They become saturated with meaning and, despite their apparent insignificance, they have a deep impact on people's lives. Plants provide an image of the shifting of the seasons and the course of life, representing a link with nature, which has become more and more remote. They stand for what is beautiful and pleasant in life, and being able to nurture them is a confirmation that we have what it takes to create a real home.

“People’s relationship to potted plants can be perceived as a free zone for our own thoughts, in contrast with our often stressful existence, with all its demands,” explains Clas Bergvall. “They also remind us of situations and people we have encountered in life and create a sense of human communion across space and time. To individuals, potted plants are part of what both reminds them of and helps form the shifting phases of their lives.”

When potted plants first started to appear in Sweden, in the orangeries of the nobility, they were something of a status symbol. But the view of indoor plants would change, and as early as the first half of the 20th century they had become a given part of what makes a house a home, a zone for reflection and feelings about your own life. The cultural significance of potted plants was established in the early 20th century and is found both in August Strindberg’s *Black Banners* and Ellen Key’s *Beauty for All*. The same way of perceiving them is also found in florist shops.

“But even though the overarching view of potted plants recurs in various contexts, the concrete contents of feelings, images, and memories create something uniquely personal,” explains Clas Bergvall. “My dissertation provides an in-depth view of potted plants in the home, but also of the reader’s own personal self.”

Source: Umeå University

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