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Style flowers to elevate spirits

By Elaine Gaston
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Fresh flowers in the home have a positive effect on the people who live there.

According to a Harvard Medical School study, people are more compassionate toward each other, there's less worry and anxiety, and homeowners feel more energetic and happier when fresh flowers are displayed in the house.

"Other research has proven that flowers make people happy when they receive them," said Dr. Nancy Etcoff of Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School in a news release about the Harvard study. "What we didn't know is that spending a few days with flowers in the home can affect a wide variety of feelings."

The study showed participants who displayed fresh-cut flowers for less than a week felt an increase in feelings of compassion and kindness for others, according to the Society of American Florists. It further showed participants placed bouquets in kitchens, dining rooms and living rooms, where they spent the most time, with many reporting they liked seeing them when they first rise in the morning.

"As a psychologist, I'm particularly intrigued to find that people who live with flowers report fewer episodes of anxiety and depressed feelings," Etcoff said in the release.

"Our results suggest that flowers have a positive impact on our well-being."

Seems easy enough to add flower power to your house. Just pick up a bouquet of flowers from the local grocery, the neighborhood florist shop or take clippings from plantings in your landscape and plop them down into a vase.

Not so fast. If you're like many homeowners, creating a floral arrangement with fresh-cut flowers can be tricky. Although you're likely to still benefit from the mere presence of fresh flowers, there's just something about a well-put-together floral arrangement that enhances their beauty and helps homeowners feel they've had a hand in creating what basically amounts to a sculptural piece of art.

Most people make the mistake of trying to cram too many flowers into a vase with no rhyme or reason.

"Less is always more," said Scott Johnson, a floral designer at Community Florist in Pawleys Island and the 2007 S.C. Designer of the Year as named by the S.C. Florist Association. "You can use less flowers, but have more of an impact. It's all in how it's arranged."

Another mistake people make is failing to create a grid that allows the flowers to stay in place and upright, Johnson said. You can use floral foam - it now is available in a variety of colors to add interest to the vase - but Johnson enjoys using natural materials, such as curly willow or long-stemmed grasses inserted into the vase that help keep the flower stems stable while also working to add texture and pizzazz to a clear vase.

"When you walk around it, you've got something going on even inside the vase," he said.

Another trick Johnson often uses is spraying the large tropical leaves and grasses with Green Glo, a spray available at florist shops that gives the foliage a shiny, glossy appearance.

Old school rules, such as arranging flowers in odd numbers or avoiding mixing in tropicals, "are made to be broken," Johnson said.

"I say arrange until it's pretty," he said. "If it takes 10 flowers, then go with it. ... If you only have one rose in your yard, I say cut it and use it in a vase."

Floral designer Rebecca Cole of the Discovery Channel's "Surprise By Design" show and a member of the Society of American Florists recommended extending the life of store-bought flowers by removing all the leaves below the

waterline and including flower food for extra nutrients. If the water becomes cloudy, Cole said to replace it with properly mixed flower food solution, according to a news release from the Society of American Florists.

Also, re-cut the stems at an angle, removing up to 2 inches, so the flower is better able to absorb the nutrients, Cole suggested.

Once flowers fade, remove them and then relocate the lasting ones to a smaller vase.

And by no means place an arrangement near a heat source, such as on top of the TV or near the computer.

"Heat will kill it," Johnson said.

Don't be afraid to try different things with arrangements. Just recently, for a 16th birthday party, Johnson created arrangements that resembled ice cream floats. He filled tall vases with colorful jelly beans, topped each with a cluster of carnations for a rounded effect and then inserted two straws at the top. They were a hit at the party, Johnson said.

The designer said he also likes to use foliage as an added element.

For example, large tropical leaves, rolled back and stapled, inserted into the arrangement create a ribbon effect, and long blades of ornamental grasses, with each side tucked into the vase and the other end folded over the top of a low bouquet, create the look of a basket of flowers.

"I like to do things that are a conversation piece," he said.

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