

Classic spider plants are grown in hanging pots

PHOTO COURTESY OF FESSLER NURSERY



# Nature is in the house

A back-to-earth ethic fuels the lust for new, classic and collectible house plants

BY KYM POKORNY

IN THE 1970S, it seemed like everyone decorated their indoor space with a pothos (*Epipremnum aureum*) winding around the ceiling and a dusty-looking *Coleus* on the windowsill, but houseplants fell out of favor during the more technology-driven '80s.

Now they've come roaring back.

In 2020, 37.6 million — or 29.3% — of U.S. households participated in indoor houseplant gardening, according to a National Gardening Association survey. Of those surveyed, 48% increased their indoor houseplant gardening during the pandemic. Twenty-two percent of those who spent money on gardening supplies last year spent more on houseplants and supplies due to COVID-19 stay-at-home orders.

Those figures don't come as a surprise to anyone in the nursery industry. Sales of houseplants have been building, but went up so much during the pandemic that growers were caught by surprise.

"Demand started to go up three to four years ago," said Tanner Fessler, sales and supply manager for **Fessler Nursery Co.**

(Woodburn, Oregon). "The first year we were building our clientele, but then it increased 45% and then 50%. When the pandemic started, we had almost no sales at first, but once the garden centers figured it out, the demand skyrocketed. We couldn't keep up."

## Demand keeps going up

Though sales of old standards like *Philodendron*, *Dracaena*, sansevieria (formerly its own genus, now classified under *Dracaena*), palms and *pothos* remain steady, new varieties bring a pretty price. Just like the housing industry, prices for houseplants are through the roof. Bidding wars and people who "flip" plants encourage more spending.

Demand doesn't seem to be going down — if anything, it's still going up — and, as Fessler pointed out, "If you haven't ordered for 2022, chances are you'll be sorry."

At Fessler, *Philodendrons*, *Peperomia* and ric rac cactus (*Disocactus anguliger*, aka fishbone or zig zag cactus) stay at >>



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*Ficus elastica*, also known as a variegated rubber plant, is a colorful houseplant option at Fessler Nursery. **Next page:** Mother-in-law's tongue (*Dracaena trifasciata*), is an easy option for first-time houseplant buyers.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF FESSLER NURSERY

the top of the best sellers list. The cactus has lobed leaves that look like a backbone and, with enough light, pink and white orchid-like blooms.

*Tradescantia* plants are popular, too, according to Fessler. *Tradescantia* 'Pink Panther' fills out with very small leaves of pink and white that grow in a perfect bowl. 'Tortuga' is green with the undersides of its leaves a purplish, reddish-pink. "Kind of like a disco ball, it looks different at different angles," Fessler said.

"One of our new houseplants is *Senecio rowleyanus* or string of pearls," he said. "These are something we're growing more of. There are some crazy ones coming out, like string of watermelons, string of fish and string of turtles. They are slowly replacing *Dracaena* and *Sansevieria* plants, but in the long term, I don't think they will be the next *Monstera*, but they are really popular."

While the pandemic had a big role in driving the current houseplant hysteria, it's not the only factor. It just helped turn a growing craze into a massive fad, as people spent so much time at home being swept away by new hobbies.

Back in the macrame-drenched '70s, the back-to-the-land, conservation-conscious sector of society wanted to be closer to nature. That yearning seeped into popular culture, as more and more people bought houseplants to surround themselves in greenery.

"Then the hippies grew up and started landscaping their yards so houseplants



went by the wayside," said Michelle Bundy, a regional sales manager of wholesale indoor foliage for **Casa Flora Inc.**, grower of ferns and houseplants. "Now we've gone full circle and want to connect to nature again, which is reflected in our desire for houseplants."

Growing houseplants gives people a sense of accomplishment, according to Bundy. Studies have shown that just being around plants decreases stress and increases happiness.

"The practice of growing houseplants is calming," Bundy said. "It gives you a sense of purpose and that sense of purpose

gives you satisfaction. I find this myself. It's very rewarding and there's always something new."

### Endless variety and expensive tastes

Breeding is seeing to it that customers don't get bored. New plants are coming on the market in increasingly more mind-bending colors and variegation, assuring that new converts have something to inspire them. The more indoctrinated have something to keep them interested and coming back for more.

New or rare plants can sell for thousands of dollars. A quick internet search on the shopping site Etsy revealed a variegated *Monstera* that was available for almost \$10,000, and many *Philodendron* plants selling for more than \$5,000.

But nothing on Etsy beats the most expensive houseplants in the world – *Monstera adansonii variagata* plants have sold for a whopping \$38,000. That's the most expensive, unless you count the Shenzhen Nongke Orchid that sells for \$200,000 or the Old Pine Bonsai for a staggering \$1.3 million.

The out-of-sight prices and collector vibe of the houseplant fad in the U.S. is reminiscent of the Tulip Mania in Holland

An advertisement for Nutrien Solutions. On the left is a black and white photograph of a tulip flower. To the right of the image, the word "Nutrien" is written in a large, bold, italicized sans-serif font, with "Solutions" in a smaller, regular sans-serif font below it. Underneath the company name, the text "Visit your local Nutrien Solutions location today." is written in a bold sans-serif font. At the bottom, the name "Cody Plath" is written in a bold sans-serif font, followed by "Cornelius Branch | 503.640.2371" in a regular sans-serif font.

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in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century when investors paid the equivalent of a year's pay for a tulip bulb. When the market for tulips crashed, many a Dutchman was ruined.

"As a society, we've adopted the idea that houseplants are cool and collectable," said Mark Leichty, director of business development for **Little Prince of Oregon Nursery** (Aurora, Oregon). "What did we collect before — coins, stamps, baseball cards? Collecting things has slowly taken on a new aspect. We want to collect something alive that we can nurture."

Ann Amato, propagation and production specialist at **Cistus Nursery LLC** (Sauvie Island, Oregon) and **Secret Garden Growers LLC** (Canby, Oregon), fell in love with houseplants as a teenager. She loved to read and wanted to bring nature indoors, so she did. Her collection now tops out at 500 plants spread throughout her three-story home in Portland, some under grow lights.

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Fessler Nursery has dedicated greenhouse space for their production of tropicals.

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collect a lot of houseplants,” Amato said. “And I’m curious. I want to understand how a plant grows. For some — the more experienced people — it’s status, too. It has become competitive like orchid shows.”

### Powered by social media

Social media drives that competitiveness, according to Leichty. From January to November 2020, TikTok, a social media vehicle popular with younger generations, saw a 156% increase in home and garden content creation. Furthermore, according to Google, searches for houseplants hit record highs.

Facebook houseplant groups, Instagram and Pinterest eye candy collections and other online vehicles create an extremely effective way to market plants. Online word-of-mouth disseminates information about new varieties, goad bidding

wars, and ease the exchanges of information that provide beginners with a more positive experience.

The most popular houseplants belong to the aroid family, according to Amato. Plants like *Philodendron*, *Pothos* and *Monstera* rank at the top. *Monstera* appeals to people because they’re easy to grow and can have dramatic foliage with holes and have striking variegation.

At Little Prince, where they grow 100 to 200 different houseplants, one of the biggest sellers is *Monstera adansonii*, a vining plant with gaps in the foliage similar to more common *Monstera* but much smaller. Even more popular is *Albuca spiralis* ‘Frizzle Sizzle’.

“We have not been able to keep enough ‘Frizzle Sizzle’, Leichty said. “In the wild in South Africa, it goes summer dormant, but not in cultivation. It’s very simi-



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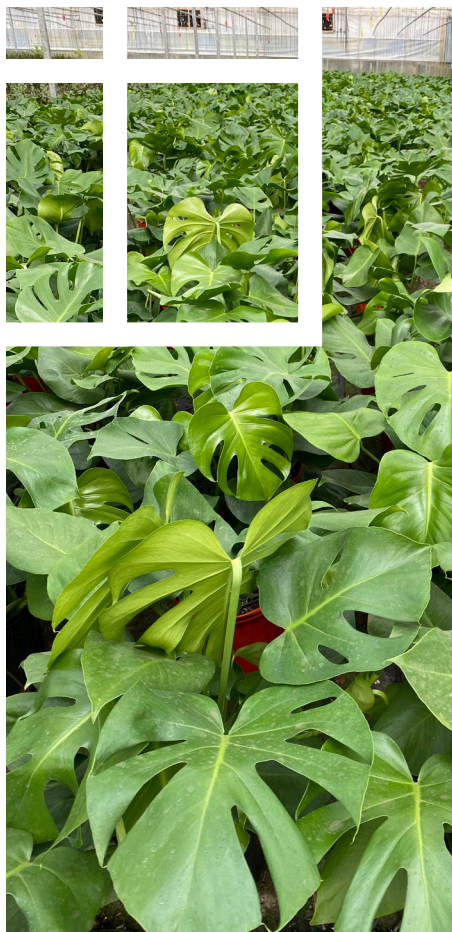
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*Monstera deliciosa* is a very popular variety with contemporary shoppers.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FESSLER NURSERY.

lar to *Amaryllis*. It blooms multiple times a year with beautiful yellow flowers. When you see it, it's one of those things you go 'Oh my god, I have to have one of those.'"

In production now at Little Prince is a cute little plant called *Medinilla*, a prostrate form with tons of fuchsia-colored flowers. They were able to get enough grown to sell thousands, which started online at \$50 apiece, Leichty said.

Millennials are credited with kicking off the current obsession with houseplants. As they are not buying homes and having children, their need for nurturing finds an outlet in growing plants.

"Plants are the new pets," said Rebecca Orr, marketing manager at **Terra Nova Nurseries** in Canby, Oregon. "Young people don't own homes and don't have a lot of space or even a balcony so houseplants give them the opportunity to nurture

something. You can have houseplants in an apartment or dorm room. It's an investment you can take with you."

But it's more than that, she said. Millennials aren't the only ones filling their homes with houseplants. Plants are available where shoppers buy milk or pick up a prescription. Everyone seems to be trying their hand at growing a few. Once they have one, the obsession kicks in. The visual aspect of houseplants draws people in and with the pandemic and social media, it was the perfect storm for houseplants' popularity to hit new heights.

Terra Nova concentrates on *Begonia* and *Coleus* for houseplants. The biggest sellers are *Begonia* 'Ruby Slippers' — winner of Best Novelty at the Colorado State University plant trials — and *B.* 'Silver Treasure'.

"We had 'Silver Treasure' at the



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Cultivate show,” Orr said. “Dozens and dozens of people would stop. It forms a completely big and solid mound and the underside of the leaves is deep maroon. It’s so tough. It was the plant of the event.”

Not everyone follows Amato’s example of decorating their home with 500 plants, but interiorscaping is a real thing. Public spaces are decked out with more plants than ever. Home shows, magazines and social media illustrate how to design your home with houseplants and the

masses have followed suit.

Horticultural social media influencers like Summer Rayne Oakes, Maria Failla and Laura LeBoutillier hype up houseplants, and people listen.

Oakes is a model in New York with a degree from Cornell University in environmental science and entomology. She writes a blog, has four books under her belt and has millions of fans.

Failla is comfortably ensconced in hor-

ticulture with the podcast On the Edge that has close to a million subscribers.

LeBoutillier, who Leichthy describes as the biggest influencer in horticulture today, has five million followers of her YouTube channel Garden Answer. Little Prince has established an informal relationship with LeBoutillier and sent her a box of houseplants that she unveiled on her show.

“We began by sending her a box of



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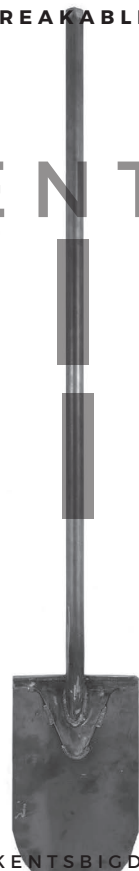
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Previous page, left: Larua LeBoutillier shared an unboxing video of Little Prince of Oregon plants. PHOTO COURTESY OF GARDEN ANSWER

Previous page, right: *Monstera adansonii* is offered as a trainable vine variety. PHOTO COURTESY OF LITTLE PRINCE OF OREGON NURSERY

plants,” Leichty said. “When she did her show we had a million hits within a day. It crashed our server. She’s been very helpful in promotion for us. We plan to pursue it.”

Any business can do the same, but Leichty recognizes the time, money and effort it takes to find an influencer and approach them. The relationship becomes a 50/50 exchange. Your plants and the influencers’ reach.

### What the future may hold

What comes next? That’s the million-dollar question. The consensus is that the houseplant craze will continue, but level out. Prices may — and that’s a big may — drop. Breeding, shipping, labor and greenhouse space contribute to the high prices.

“Whatever availability got sucked up,” Orr said. “We had a very good year. A lot of people did. Any available material you could get, people were taking. There was a massive push to have anything on the shelves. Everyone was running out. They were less concerned about getting people to buy the rarest plants. They took what they could get.”

“I think there’s going to be a leveling off,” Orr continued. “Customers will hone their taste. That happens in gardening evolution. First, you want everything. Then you start choosing quality plants that really appeal to you.”

Both Fessler and Little Prince are expanding their houseplant production and expect sales to continue to be brisk.

“We are preparing for the future by building five new greenhouses this year,” Leichty said. “That’s unprecedented for us and we’re building them with houseplants in mind. Will the demand continue? Absolutely. We have our finger on the pulse of gardening both indoor and outdoor. I just don’t see it going away. We think the colonization of Mars will happen before it ends.” ☺

*Kym Pokorny is a garden writer with more than 20 years' experience writing for The Oregonian (Portland, Oregon) and other publications. She is currently a communications specialist with Oregon State University Extension Service.*



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