An important service that plants perform is deionisation. What is that? Our nervous system functions on small electric implulses in the form of ions being received and sent by the brain to various organs. These ions are present in the air we breathe. Our body, therefore, is very sensitive to changes in ion concentrations in the environment. Air that is overcharged with positive ions has a negative effect on health and air balanced with negative ions has a positive effect. Our homes and workplaces often generate and trap so many positive ions that the occupants complain of ill health without knowing why. In general, positive ions are emitted by metallic objects while non-metallic sources release negative ions. Consequently, rooms that have the TV or the video on, synthetic wall to wall carpeting or any other synthetic fabrics like curtains, nickel chromium wire in heaters (specially bar heaters), air-conditioning systems and synthetic fabric curtains, make you tired, irritable, tense, anxious or depressed. This is the effect that the positive ions generated by these things have on you. Heating and air-conditioning systems deplete negative ions and add positive ions to the air during recirculation through metal ducts. Doesn't the air feel heavy, leaving you lethargic and drowsy, just before a storm? That is because the air is full of positive ions. Certain hot winds occasionally carry an extreme number of positive ions and they have very unpleasant effects on people. In fact positive ions can make you so depressed that it has been recorded that suicide rates go up just before a storm.

In nature, negative ions are manufactured by rain, lightening, sunshine and the breaking up of water droplets in surf, waterfalls and fountains. These clean out the air with negative ions so you feel better after the storm and the air feels fresher and cooler. Traditional Mughal architecture in India is characterised by running water around the houses and palaces. Without knowing what it actually did, the Mughals knew, from their experience in the deserts, that running water made them feel better and so the fountain became part of their aesthetic design.

There are two ways to increase the negative ions at home. One is to buy an ionizer which releases thousands of ions into the air and clears the positively charged dust, smoke and pollutants by attracting and negatively charging them. This doesn't get rid of them - it makes it heavier, so that they sink rather than float where they will be breathed in. Or you can use nature's ionizer - a low tech-alternative: the presence of still or running water, as moisture released from plants is effective in countering an increased concentration of positive ions in the air. Having a small fountain in the room where your air-condition, computer and wall to wall carpet is in will counteract some of the ill-effects caused by all three.

More specifically, the Torch Cactus (Cereus peruvianus) is ideal to counteract the fatigue and

headaches in offices where a large number of people are huddled together working on computer terminals or with electrical equipment. Even at home, if you are exposed to electronic equipment at close range, the Torch Cactus has a de-ionizing effect. (Workers at the New York Stock Exchange found that when they put this plant near their computers it restored equilibrium to the atmosphere and made them feel less tense.).

The Torch Cactus maintains the ion balance in a closed room by generating an excess of negative ions. In the presence of a higher number of negative ions, our bodies are able to absorb a greater amount of oxygen. This not only results in a healthier body metabolism but also increases our working capacity. People who live with smokers benefit from the plant's ability to decrease smoke levels in the air. It even reduces airborne infection because bacteria travels attached to dust particles and when they are heavy they sink down.

So, make a quick visit to the nursery down the road. It’s better than spending hours at the doctor's!

Maneka Gandhi