

## From wallflowers to social climbers, they're back

# Budding recruits

By Paula Beauchamp

Walking into any of the gleaming office towers along Collins St in the early 80s, visitors would be greeted by a veritable forest of plants.

Peter Gerraty, chairman of Frenchams, an indoor plant hire and maintenance company, remembers the era fondly as the heyday of his industry.

"It was a time when businesspeople were really conscious of making their offices look beautiful and fresh," he said.

Over the next decade, as the minimal aesthetic took hold, the abundance of indoor office plants disappeared, replaced by a minimum of foliage complemented by pebbles, stainless steel and glass.

Interior designers and architects, keen to maintain their minimalist lines, consciously designed office interiors leaving no space or nooks for plants, Gerraty said.

"Nobody was thinking about the benefits of plants, people were just thinking space equals money," he said.

A decade on, the wheel - and the fortunes of the indoor plant industry - looks set to turn full circle. Growing concern for the environment and demand for environmentally friendly buildings has cast office plants back into the spotlight.

The Green Building Council of Australia's green star office interiors rating tool which evaluates environmental initiatives for green star ratings, now awards up to two points for the use of plants in an office fit out.

Its purpose is to encourage the installation of indoor plants that improve the indoor environment.

Two points are awarded where the office incorporates one large plant or two small plants per office setting.

Margaret Burchett, adjunct professor in biology at the University of Technology (Sydney) and her team, are world-leading researchers in the environmental impact of indoor plants.

"We need to think of indoor plants as an intrinsic part of living inside buildings," she said.

Prof Burchett's studies show conclusively that plants absorb and break down volatile organic compounds such as benzene and acetone, making indoor spaces safer.

And with most people spending about 90 per cent of their time indoors, much of it at work, the importance of indoor plants in the workplace is clear.

In tests where a variety of plants were used, Prof Burchett's team found the micro-organisms in the plant's root zone would kick in to reduce the volatile organic load every time it exceeded 100 parts per million in the indoor space.

"Our evidence shows that plants clean the office air of volatiles and they work well" she said.

"We are now researching the minimum number of plants you can get away with and still see this action." Studies In Germany and Sweden have found plants in the work space reduce sick leave absences.

In one study, in a Swedish hospital the absentee rate in one department fell from 15 per cent to below 5 percent after plants were introduced.

Prof Burchett said that regardless of the cost of hiring and maintaining plants, studies consistently showed worker satisfaction - in terms of productivity and retention – more than paid for it.

Plants have also been shown to lower workplace stress and decrease respiratory disorders.

Invests Property installed one plant per person during the company's five-star green star office fit out.

The City of Melbourne's six green- star office building, CH2, also uses plants to filter the light.

Mr Gerraty, who won the tender to supply plants for the CH2 building, said he believed people were beginning to understand that plants had a function beyond looking good.

"They break up the clinical look of an office setting which is great, but they also provide so many more benefits," he said.

Rachael O'Keefe of Rentokil Tropical Plants has watched demand for indoor plants in offices soar in the past 18 months.

A Plantscaping Specialist, MS O'Keefe works with architects and interior designers during the design stage of an office fit out to ensure plants are tastefully accommodated.

New trends include special joinery to position plants above filing cabinets and using plants as natural space dividers.

She predicts the trend of incorporating plants in office spaces will only gain momentum.

"Plants are going to become more and more popular and we'll increasingly see them used as design features," she said.