

# SECRETS TO A HAPPY HOME

What makes a house a happy, healthy home? The experts share the decorating, design and eco tips to make your home a place of purity, comfort and calm

WORDS CATHERINE MCCORMACK



## The healthy home

### Open a window

For an instant mood boost, throw open your windows. The invisible menace of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) can build up in the home, triggering asthma attacks and allergies; according to the US Environmental Protection Agency, the air inside our homes and offices can be up to 100 times more polluted than the air outdoors. Fresh air is the best way to clear out VOCs and irritants from chemical cleaners and building by-products. Consider reducing the amount of toxins entering your home by swapping chemical cleaning products for natural, organic formulations. "By using low toxin products in your home, you're creating a healthier indoor air environment, which means a reduced risk of eye and throat irritations, allergies and respiratory complaints, even asthma," says Sharon Hamilton, green interior designer for Your Abode.

### Plants that care

Lush, sculptural and virtually indestructible, indoor plants such as *Dracaena*, *Spathiphyllum* (peace lily) and mother-in-law's tongue not only add glorious green to your home, they absorb carbon dioxide and transform it into oxygen for better breathing. Tested by NASA, these plants are particularly adept at removing toxins from the air, in some cases improving air quality by up to 90 per cent. "These plants have the ability to filter and clean up some of the volatile organic compounds in the air," says Sharon.

**Tip:** PEACE LILIES AND DRACAENA REQUIRE MINIMUM UPKEEP, NEEDING JUST A LITTLE WATER WHEN THE LEAVES DROOP AND AN OCCASIONAL VISIT OUTDOORS.

### Look to nature

Your home should be a clean, non-toxic space that's not hazardous to your health – ideally a place where you can escape the toxins and stresses of office life. "Essential to a sustainable, healthy home are natural materials that don't make the air or living environment dangerous," says Caroline Pidcock, an architect who specialises in environmentally friendly houses. With their richly varied colours and textures, raw materials like linen, organic cotton and pure wool provide an ideal backbone for a serene decorating scheme. Timber is particularly good. "Timber that's unsealed, or treated with a natural finish, will 'breathe' and help to improve the indoor air quality," says building biologist Gwen Hanna of Building Wisdom. >

**Tip:** "Bicarbonate of soda, white vinegar or lemon juice and a microfibre cloth are all you need to keep everything clean, including bathrooms and kitchens," says Gwen. White vinegar will also help kill mould. "People think vinegar smells, but – unlike commercial bleaches – the vapours clear very quickly."



**Tip:** Look for pieces finished with oil or wax, rather than ones sealed with polyurethane products, which can stop timber from breathing.



PHOTOGRAPHY (OPPOSITE) MICHAEL OMM, (TOP RIGHT) LINCOLN BARBOUR, (BOTTOM RIGHT) JOHN PAUL URIZAR



**Tip:** Get creative with your displays. String postcards together to create a mobile, cluster vases in colour groups and add texture with natural weaves and prints. The art of decorating is as important as what is actually being displayed.

## The comforting home

### It's the little things

The one unifying element of the many splendid homes we cover in *HB* is a sense of personality and joy. The secret? Don't focus on the end picture; just enjoy the journey. "Our home is not precious or perfect – we've been renovating for six years and we're still not finished," says Belinda Graham, author of decorating blog The Happy Home (thehappyhomeblog.com). "Recently, I've learnt to 'pretty up' the mundane. I love fundamentals to be rather basic, in neutral colours and simple shapes, but not boring. So I choose white towels with beautiful fringing and I store my cooking utensils in decorative vases – it's nice to see beauty in unexpected places."

### Enduring love

Invest in furniture pieces with which you have a sentimental connection, whether they're brand new or antique. "Furniture can make you feel happy," say Nicholas Karlovasitis and Sarah Gibson, the duo behind graphic and furniture design company Designbythem. Handcrafted pieces, in particular, can create a positive emotional connection that brings happiness to a room. This reassuring sense of history and craftsmanship establishes comfort and permanency.

**Tip:** USE OPEN-SHELF BOOKCASES, AS PICTURED OPPOSITE, TO ZONE OFF AREAS WITHIN OPEN-PLAN LIVING SPACES, OR TRY USING SCREENS MADE OF SHEER FABRIC.

### In the zone

Boundaries bring comfort, creating a sense of intimacy and purpose. In this era of open-plan living, homes boast ample space, but while this is usually a desirable attribute, these wide-open spaces can detract from your home's sense of soul. The solution is to create living zones within the open-plan area. Connect with friends and family once more by setting up cosy and convivial corners for chatting or relaxing, using oversized cushions and throws, screening and shelving. Colour is another visual way to distinguish one area from the next. Use a slight tonal variation for the walls in the kitchen, dining and living spaces to subtly suggest a change in zone without compromising the overall sense of unity. >

**Tip:** To make disparate pieces work together, interior designers Mardi Doherty and Fiona Lynch of Doherty Lynch suggest mixing old with new. "This offers much more flexibility to incorporate things you love because you're not limited by an overarching theme," explains Fiona.



PHOTOGRAPHY (TOP LEFT) MARI ERIKSSON, (TOP RIGHT) GORTA YUUKI, (BOTTOM LEFT) JOHN PAUL URIZAR, (OPPOSITE) BIRGITTA WOLFGANG DREJER





*"Love begins* AT HOME, AND IT IS NOT HOW MUCH WE DO... BUT HOW MUCH LOVE WE PUT IN THAT ACTION" ~ MOTHER TERESA

*Tip:* Clean windows regularly and fit with sheer curtains to gently filter the light. Use mirrors to bounce light around small spaces.

## Love where you live

### Naturally light

Of all the elements that bring happiness to a space, natural light is possibly the most important – and the easiest to enjoy. "When you walk into a place and it's bright, and you can see and feel and understand what the day is like outside and see it change – there is something wonderfully uplifting about that," says architect Caroline Pidcock. A lack of natural light can lead to lack of serotonin in the brain, resulting in lethargy, fatigue and even, over time, increased weight gain. By encouraging sunlight into the home, you'll find waking up in the mornings easier and enjoy more bursts of energy.

### Dr DIY

Sometimes it's the smallest things that make the biggest difference to how you feel about your home. Niggling annoyances that you promise to get around to fixing but never find the time to address add to stress levels, so seize the day and pull out that toolbox! The feeling of satisfaction at a problem solved is rewarding and worthy of boasting about to the rest of the family.

### Kids spaces

Happy children make a happy home, but their mess can make you feel miserable. The Happy Home blog author Belinda Graham's decorating solution is to "let their presence be evident in every room – but don't let it overpower everything else." In her home, the bottom shelf of the living room bookcase is stacked with kids titles, while a magnetic activity board keeps them company in the kitchen. "I also put a select few toys in my kids' rooms and rotate these regularly with others stored in our shed," she says. "There's less mess and they feel like they're getting new toys!" >



## 5 tips for a harmonious home

- Boost the flow of positive energy in your home and life with the ancient Chinese art of feng shui. Elizabeth Wiggins from Feng Shui Living suggests you...
- 1 Protect your front door** Objects in direct alignment with your door (such as a tree or telegraph pole) can cause challenges for the occupants. Help disperse this negative energy by placing a fence or growing plants directly in front of the object.
  - 2 Encourage good energy** A beautiful picture on the wall opposite the main door will encourage energy and opportunities to come into your life and home.
  - 3 Tidy your bedroom** A bedroom should be clean, tidy and clutter-free – this includes a neat wardrobe. Do not stash things under the bed as *qi* – the Chinese word used to describe the energy or 'life force' of the universe – can stagnate there. The body can absorb the negative *qi* while you sleep over it at night.
  - 4 Move your mirrors** In feng shui, mirrors in the bedroom are considered very inauspicious. They can negatively affect our sleep and relationships, especially if placed at the foot of the bed. Can't move your mirror? Consider hanging a sheer curtain over the front.
  - 5 Repair leaky taps** Leaky taps are thought to symbolically represent gradual loss of income, so be wealthier (and water-wise) by fixing faulty faucets.

*Tip:* Give your child a feeling of ownership and pride over their space by asking for their input into the decoration of their room. Help them collect inspiring pictures to form their very own mood board.



PHOTOGRAPHY (OPPOSITE) TIM JAMES (TOP RIGHT) CAMERA PRESS/AUSTRAL (BOTTOM RIGHT) CRAIG WALL



## The serene home

### A place for everything

"One of the things that brings harmony to a home is a lack of mess, providing a place for all the things in your life," says architect Caroline Pidcock, who uses bookshelves to store and display her treasures. "The idea isn't to hide stuff away, but rather to have a place for the things that are important and meaningful to us." Nicholas Karlovasitis and Sarah Gibson of DesignByThem agree: "Too often, people remove character from a space in the pursuit of uncluttered areas." Their tip? "Designate one wall or area specifically for storage and use the vertical as much as possible, as this opens up the space."

### Peaceful energy

The stand-by energy used by household appliances can add up to more than 10 per cent of all the electricity you use\*, which means bigger bills, more greenhouse gas emissions, and even disrupted sleep. "Having fewer electrical appliances running means less exposure to electromagnetic radiation, providing a less stressful environment that feels more comfortable," says Gwen Hanna of Building Wisdom. "My advice would be to avoid wireless systems, or at least turn them off when you're going to bed. If you can get a better quality of sleep, your body will be more rested and you'll feel better."

**Tip:** Convert your pin board into a 'mood board' by covering it with some patterned fabric and using it to display inspiring images, ribbons and cards, along with any invitations, lists or notices. You'll be surprised at how striking this simple piece can be.

**Tip:** INVEST IN A REMOTE-CONTROL POWER BOARD (AVAILABLE ONLINE AT [WWW.TODAE.COM.AU](http://WWW.TODAE.COM.AU)). THE REMOTE CONTROL TURNS OFF ANY APPLIANCES PLUGGED INTO THE POWER BOARD, MAKING IT SIMPLE TO TURN OFF ALL YOUR APPLIANCES AT ONCE.

### Makes scents

A happy home tends to all the senses and the oft-overlooked olfactory sense is one of the most important of all, helping to wipe away stress and create a sense of wellbeing. Long-lasting, all-natural beeswax candles are the best option, emitting zero toxins as they burn and adding a sweet, subtle honey aroma to the home – just take care to trim the wick each time you light it for a smoke-free burn. Soy and palm-based candles are another option, as they're non-toxic and made from renewable resources. **ib**

**Tip:** What does a happy home smell like? Tangy citrus with rich, woody bottom notes, says Karen MacKenzie, president of the International Aromatherapy and Aromatic Medicine Association. Try her uplifting and relaxing blend in a burner: five drops of sweet orange essential oil, two drops of lime essential oil and two drops of patchouli essential oil.



\*STATISTIC TAKEN FROM THE AUSTRALIAN GREEN CONSUMER GUIDE BY TANYA HA (2007, UNSW PRESS) PHOTOGRAPHY (TOP LEFT) CATH MUSCAT. (BOTTOM LEFT) S. CALITZ/INSIDE/PICTURE MEDIA. (OPPOSITE) RICHARD POWERS

"A happy home IS A HEALTHY HOME - ONE THAT NURTURES THE HEALTH AND SPIRIT OF ITS OCCUPANTS"

~ GWEN HANNA OF BUILDING WISDOM

