

'Tis the season of joy!

Those wreaths, garlands and evergreen branches festooning your house this time of year don't just make it look holiday gorgeous—science proves they keep you calm and happy right through New Year's Day and beyond! Here's how . . .



Evergreens lift your spirits!

Whenever the season has you feeling frazzled, just move a little closer to your Christmas tree: Israeli research proves the scent of evergreens gives you an instant pick-me-up. And the reasons are twofold, says neurologist Alan R. Hirsch, M.D., director of the Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation. "The scent boosts beta brain waves, which are associated with alertness, leaving you feeling energized and in control—and it triggers pleasant associations with happy holidays in the past." That's a one-two punch virtually guaranteed to K.O. stress!

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Pinecones spark your creativity!

They make pretty decorative accents, smell great in your fireplace, are fun to gather and are perfect for inspiring simple crafts projects, says Carol Field Dahlstrom, author of *Christmas Happy and Bright*. For a quick and easy ornament, just dab the edges with glitter glue, tie a ribbon under the top segment and hang on the tree. A slew of studies shows the happiness-enhancing benefits of expressing your creativity. And when you and the kids do it together, you build a sense of family teamwork that will keep you close for Christmases to come!

Did you know? It's no coincidence so many cultures and religions have holidays in late December, says Mandel: The winter solstice is a biological and psychological low point for us. "So holidays help cheer us up!"



Glowing candles and shiny ornaments brighten your world!

The latest research reveals most of us experience some form of "winter blues" as the days grow darker and colder. And the holiday's candles, shiny ornaments and bright lights are the perfect antidote for seasonal stress, notes Mandel. And it's not just because of the light and warmth they give us: "By appealing to your inner child, Christmas ornaments connect you with the excitement you felt about the holidays when you were a kid, while lighting candles adds grace and ritual to the celebration," says Tina Tessina, Ph.D., coauthor of *The Happiness Equation*.



Mistletoe gives you focus (and a stronger marriage)!

Steal a kiss under the mistletoe and it'll boost your levels of feel-good endorphins and the bonding chemical oxytocin—and even improve your concentration. In fact, couples who kiss before work have been found to have fewer fender benders en route! "And research shows that with every kiss, your guy passes some of his testosterone—a big libido booster for both sexes—to you, putting you both in the mood!" says Debbie Mandel, author of *Addicted to Stress*.



Christmas cactuses spread your joy!

Studies show this gorgeous tropical plant (actually a succulent, not a cactus) is a great natural pollution fighter! It's almost impossible to kill and tends to live forever, bringing an element of continuity to your celebrations, says Mandel. What's more, the Christmas cactus is extremely easy to propagate! "Just pick off a Y-shaped segment, stick it in the soil, and you'll have a new plant that visitors can take home to enjoy year after year," she says.



Stars and angels promise your year will bring blessings!

Studies show symbols like a star or an angel act as powerful "visual affirmations." So whether it has five points or wings, "that ornament at the top of your tree makes you feel a little closer to Heaven—and more hopeful of finding it here on Earth," says Tessina. Result: You're calmer and more optimistic—and on course for a merrier, mellower new year!



Poinsettias clean the air!

Chances are you already know houseplants make great natural air purifiers; according to NASA research, they filter out up to 99% of chemicals, toxins and carcinogens (like cigarette smoke) in your home's air. But guess what: This Mexican plant's extra-large leaves make it among the most effective air cleaners around! Something else that might surprise you? Its showy star-shaped "flowers" aren't flowers at all but leaves!

—Barbara Hustedt Crook