

# Love sprouts eternal

House plants offer comfort, companionship when no one is around

**YULIYA MIRANDA RACKAL**  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Ilhan Elwidaa laughs self-consciously as she recounts how her relationship with her favourite house plant began.

"A friend gave me a tiny lemon plant, which is very hard to survive in cold weather," says the retired Mississauga accountant. Much to Elwidaa's surprise, the plant started to grow just weeks after she put it in her living room shortly before the first pandemic lockdown last spring.

Even as her social life wilted, Elwidaa's relationship with her new botanical buddy blossomed.

"Through all these coronavirus times I would care for her every day. She is growing, giving me comfort. I feel like someone is beside me that makes me comfortable. Everyone in my family is laughing at me, thinking I am crazy!"

Yet, according to psychologists, her behaviour is not crazy at all, especially at a time when humans are deprived of social interaction, as so many have been for almost a year.

Treating a plant or other non-human object as a person is known in the scientific world as anthropomorphism. Psychology researchers at the University of Hong Kong have concluded that anthropomorphized objects can be an important source of comfort, pleasure and support, helping to banish — or at least alleviate — the stress and loneliness that have accompanied the pandemic.

Toronto clinical psychologist Rostyslav Shemechko has increasingly noticed this phenomenon among his patients as lockdowns and social distancing have dragged on.

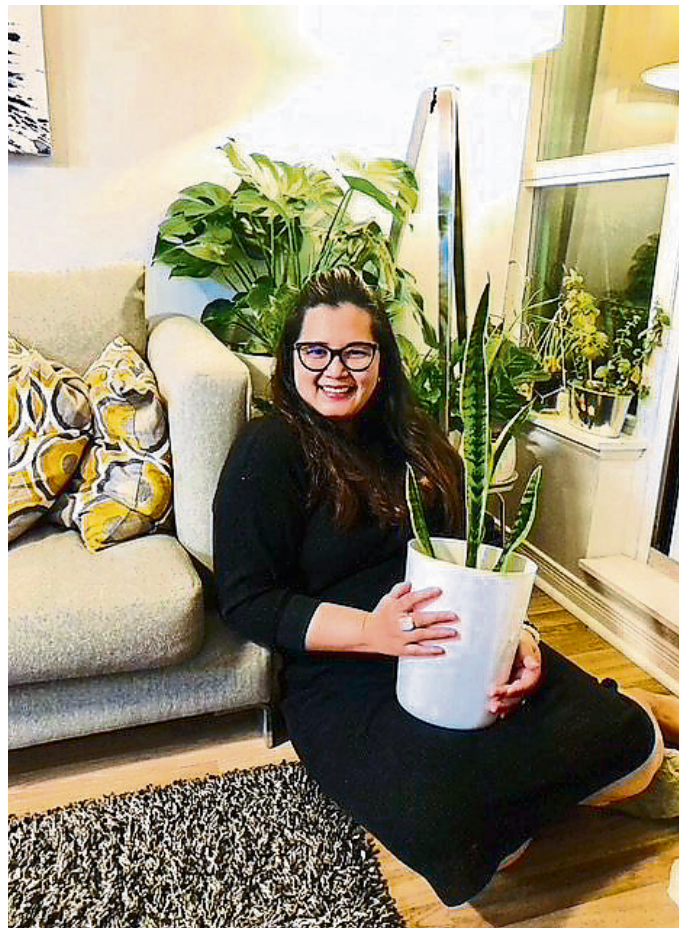
"I ask them how they can take that feeling of being alone, not getting attention, and turn it around to how they can be supportive and caring to others. That could be by supporting people, animals or even plants."

The goal, Shemechko says, is to find an activity that brings a sense of achievement, pleasure and accomplishment. "Many people are experiencing so much anxiety, so many worries about so many things and are feeling overwhelmed by their families," he notes.

For some, house plants could be just the thing to sprout positive feelings.

Marion Comper, a horticultural therapist and retired landscape architect, often notices the role plants play in improving emotional well-being as she answers questions on the Toronto Horticultural Society's information line. "After 10 minutes of hearing about a problem with an orchid, I can sense that there isn't anything wrong with it. The plant is just an excuse to have a human connection — and that's OK."

Trixie Reichart, a volunteer with Master Gardeners of Ontario, has also witnessed the surge in demand for botanical buddies. "A lot of people are



Clockwise from top left: plant lovers Missy Behis, Ilhan Elwidaa, Darryl Cheng and Marion Comper.



Yuliya Miranda Rachal with her botanical buddy.

maxed out right now, and lots of folks have more time to adopt a pet or a plant. They have more time to care for it." She notes that many convenience stores and nurseries are sold out of plants because of the strong demand combined with reduced supply from distributors across the world.

Darryl Cheng, author of the popular Instagram feed @houseplantjournal, has seen growing interest in his book "The New Plant Parent." Promoted as "the botanical bible for sprouting enthusiasts," the book was published in 2019, but sales shot up last year as the pandemic took hold.

Cheng, a former engineer, asserts: "More people are saying that being a 'plant parent' is a nurturing experience. My ABCs of plant appreciation focus not just on the appearance and biology of plants, but also the role they play as companions."

His description of plant care closely mirrors human relationships: "The connection and companionship that plants provide isn't static. It evolves over time, as relationships are apt to do."

Cheng even sees similarities between plant owners and parents of actual humans.

"We take pictures of our children over time, and we can appreciate how they have grown. It's a very similar feeling when I get a plant as a cutting, and it grows into a big, impressive specimen. Like children, the growth of plants isn't all because of us. But we give them the right conditions to thrive."

Since the COVID pandemic started, 37-year-old Missy Behis has been trying to do exactly that for her own "plant babies" in her small condo in Mississauga.

"Their colour and the ambience they create give me a mood lift," Behis says. "Each morning I walk around spritzing them with water and chat-

ting with them. If there is a yellow leaf, I get worried and ask 'what's wrong, baby?'"

Behis laughs as she notes that in her native Philippines the words "plantitas" and its male equivalent "plantitos" have become the trendy nicknames for adults who have developed a passion for plants during the pandemic.

Scientists have come to realize that seeking comfort and pleasure in plants is a natural part of human behaviour. Harvard naturalist Edward O. Wilson coined the term "biophilia" for the human desire to be close to other forms of life in nature, to feel their presence, and be comforted by them. The word is derived from the Greek for "life" and "love or affection," which together mean "love of life."

Comper, the horticultural therapist who is also studying for a diploma in social work, sees an innate connection between humans and nature: "We come from the earth, we go back to the earth. Plants are an extension of our evolution, of our environment. It's something we are often unaware of, but we feel it."

Nonetheless, she has a word of caution for budding indoor gardeners. "You want to set people up for success with their plants," she says.

Many callers to the horticultural society have unrealistic expectations, hoping for immediate perfection.

"Start with something easy," she advises, "something that will thrive in the conditions you have inside your home. When plants sprout a new leaf, they are giving you positive reinforcement that what you are doing is right."

"It's like a relationship. Some of them never give back. You work really hard, you give it your all and they aren't gonna do it. If you aren't getting any benefit, those are the ones you chuck."

While Ilhan Elwidaa may not use words like biophilia or anthropomorphism to describe her love for her new lemon plant, these concepts undoubtedly lie at the heart of their mutually supportive relationship.

"I love the flowers in my garden, but it's different with the ones that come inside and stay with you all the time," Elwidaa says. "It's more than the pleasure of looking at their beauty. It's a deeper feeling. I can feel her, and she can feel me."

Yuliya Rackal is a family doctor at the St. Michael's Academic Family Health Team in Toronto and assistant professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Toronto.

## Long U.S. prison stay for Canadian drug mule who used river

Windsor man fled police, but caught in suspicious boat two weeks later

**ED WHITE**

DETROIT—A Canadian man who was found unconscious and tethered to 185 pounds of marijuana in the Detroit River was sentenced Wednesday to about six years in a U.S. prison.

The capture of Glen Mousseau last June capped a strange

few weeks in his dealings with U.S. law enforcement. The case also revealed extraordinary steps that his smuggling operation took to move drugs and cash between the two countries, even using Seabobs, a watercraft that can propel people underwater.

"The international nature of the smuggling here is noteworthy and in many ways more alarming than the run-of-the-

mill drug distribution conspiracy," U.S. District Judge Robert Cleland said.

Mousseau of Windsor, Ont., was first stopped in May while driving a rental truck in St. Clair County, Michigan, and possessing roughly \$100,000. The government said he confessed to being a smuggler who served various criminal groups.

Investigators said Mousseau quickly agreed to help agents in a methamphetamine bust. But

he fled a hotel, leaving behind phones, a laptop and a diving suit, and somehow dashed back to Canada.

He turned up two weeks later in the overnight darkness of the Detroit River as border agents pursued a suspicious boat. Carefully wrapped packages weighing 265 pounds were tied to Mousseau, including marijuana totalling 185 pounds.

"He was a mule. That's all his participation was," defence at-

torney Victor Mansour said. "He was the one who was thrown into the water. He almost died."

But the government noted that Mousseau, 49, already has a 32-year criminal record in Canada.

Mousseau urged the judge to "see some good in me." His lawyer asked for a 3 1/2-year sentence, but Cleland chose about six years.

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