

EPISODE 219**[INTRODUCTION]**

[0:00:02.6] PF: Welcome to Episode 219 of Live Happy Now. I'm your host Paula Felps, thanking you for joining us today. If you're a regular listener of Live Happy Now, you already know that we're big fans of nature. But we talk a lot about the value of getting out in nature. This week's guest is all about bringing it inside. Summer Rayne Oaks is an environmental scientist and sustainability expert who focuses on health and wellness.

Her website and YouTube channel, Homestead Brooklyn is designed to help people who live in the city, become more attuned to nature. Her new book *How to Make Your Plant Love You*. Looks at how to bring nature inside for greater happiness and wellbeing.

We caught up with Summer to talk about how to live in nature even when we're inside.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:00:47.9] PF: Summer, thank you so much for joining us on the show.

[0:00:51.2] SR: I'm happy to be here.

[0:00:53.0] PF: This is an interesting twist for us because we've talked on Live Happy Now about the need for being in nature but what I like is you're bringing all those benefits inside. I think that we haven't always thought about just how much plants can do for us. I wanted to find out first of all, what made you so interested in learning about how plants affect us?

[0:01:13.0] SR: This goes back deep because I'm a child of nature. I am in full agreement that you know, it's so great to be outdoors and to run barefoot in the grass and all of that but I know that we don't all have the luxury of being able to do that especially because so many of us are moving to the cities, including myself and that was part of the impetus of actually coming up with this book is really getting into these rituals and these routines with plants that we could develop even when we're in the city when we can't be outdoors.

[0:01:44.4] PF: You really live in the city. You want to talk about where you live?

[0:01:48.7] SR: I live in Brooklyn, New York. I don't have a backyard any longer. I just got a fire escape so it's kind of served as my balcony but yeah, I've learned to appreciate nature and maybe in a little bit more subtle ways than I had in the country as well.

[0:02:09.3] PF: A lot of times, people would think because I live in the city, I can maybe put an air fern on my window seal, they think I'm just not able to do this but you really prove that theory wrong.

[0:02:22.1] SR: Yeah, I actually grow about 1,100 plants in my Brooklyn apartment and about 560 species and I'm always kind of bringing new plants in and trialing them because you know, we don't think about is that a lot of the plants that are considered house plants, they weren't house plants to really start, unless they're cultivated variety that is you know, taken from a wild species but you know, not all of these have like really good science about how they grow indoors and I'm not saying that I'm coming out with scientific papers on plants growing indoors.

But, I have had a lot of experience of growing different varieties and I think that's really inspired a lot of folks, not just having just plants but even just having some different kinds of varieties because I think once people discover the joy of keeping plants and taking care of plants that it's an easy, slippery slope for them to want to go down and learn more.

[0:03:18.4] PF: Yeah, absolutely. Obviously, house plants are nothing new but you really do talk about how our relationship with them is changing.

[0:03:26.9] SR: I think that more of us are moving to cities which means that it's harder for us to have this kind of deeper connection, we're not necessarily always waking up in the morning, smelling a fresh cut lawn, you know, going out into the trail in the back woods and we're having less and less interactions with nature.

In many ways with this book with them, *How to Make a Plant Love You*, it's about rekindling some of those routines, developing your observational prowess, coming up with rituals that you have with plants that can allow you to create a little bit more of those deep emotional connections because it's my hope that if we could actually start stimulating those connections

on an indoor level with our plants, then we will naturally become more curious to see what is growing outside our doors and maybe even stimulate us to go outside and have some more of those deeper connections with nature.

Maybe there will be a little bit more like one off connections or special connections, things that we don't get a chance to do every day but at least we're inspired to actually go and do that.

[0:04:30.3] PF: When you talk about an emotional connection with our plants, I think that's something a lot of people have never considered that you know, they think a plant is a plant and that's kind of where it ends.

[0:04:40.5] SR: Right. You know, it's really giving us the permission to say okay, well this is a living thing, it's not just a décor object. *How to Make a Plant Love You* is a bit more like a spiritual and a philosophical guide or a relationship guide to living with plants and appreciating them as such. One of the things that I really am appreciative of of the community of people who follow me, whether it's on Instagram or YouTube is their openness and willingness to share their stories.

I had asked my community to tell me what they – how plants had positively or have positively affected their lives. Not the ones that we eat or that we bite in or that we might smoke or anything along those lines. Because they have their place too but really, it's just the ones that we surround ourselves with and it could be indoors or outdoors in a garden. I think that the community really came through with some of the most vulnerable, deeply inspiring stories of how they use plants in their life.

It could be through times of anxiety, it could be times of loss, it could be through stress, it could be through trying to concentrate when they're playing a musical instrument. These stories were so varied but there was such deep meaning with the plants that they have in their lives and I think that that, it's natural for us to actually do that and I think again, these stories will give people the opportunity to just see a different way of approaching plants and give people permission to develop an emotional connection, even if they didn't have one before.

[0:06:25.1] PF: What are some of the psychological benefits of having plants?

[0:06:28.6] SR: Some of the psychological benefits are just keeping calm, being more creative and it's so funny because you know, there has been studies looking at quantifying these means because it's like, what does it mean to be actually more creative or more productive or more of this.

In many cases, a lot of like sociologist and psychologist will take qualitative means asking a person, well, do you feel more creative than this environment? Do you feel more creative with these plants around you? Then they quantify those qualitative measurements.

There is this interesting science out there to show how it not only can calm us and to make us feel less anxious to lower our blood pressure but also to help calm us and make us feel more creative in our own environments which is really quite harmless because you know, I sort of just surround myself with plants and I think I'm a much more proactive person.

You know, city life could be really grueling and it could be very discombobulating and I think for me, I think as a way, surrounded myself with plants to make myself feel a little bit more at home.

[0:07:40.1] PF: What do they have to do with mindfulness. This was really interesting to me because you talk about plants and mindfulness. Can you talk about that connection?

[0:07:46.7] SR: Yeah, you know, part of this was like – in writing this book, it was very hard to kind of like, even put it in a category and you mentioned mindfulness because this book is very much about mindfulness and it's not just about plants, it's about – there's so many hills and valleys to this book.

It's deep in metaphor and meaning and you know, somebody at a very superficial level could read this book and say it's all about plants and I've learned how to take care of plants better. It's also about taking care of yourself and taking care of your community around you and other people around you as well.

The mindfulness is really developing part of it is developing this observational skill because when you develop these observational skills, you become sensitive to your environment. You become more sensitive to that living creature that is across from you. Same way that if you were going on a date and you're becoming more inquisitive about the person that you're not just

talking about yourself, that you're asking questions, that you're listening, that you're observing certain things that might make him feel a little bit more uncomfortable.

Or you know, you say something and somebody responds in a very positive manner. Plants are like that too but in a different kind of way. As you start to develop these sensitivities and you begin to develop a care practice with your plants, I call my care practice on Sunday's like a moving meditation.

This becomes part of your mindful journey, it becomes part of your life, it's not just like how you style your life, it's not how you're putting a plant in there and that becomes like your decor item or your pretty Pinterest board or your very floracious Instagram handle, it really becomes a part of your life and that affects how you live your life in a more positive way.

[0:09:38.7] PF: I know that there's been a lot done with gardening. Like getting out, digging in the dirt, planting plants outside is really beneficial for us emotionally and psychologically. Does that carry over, is it that same kind of effect with indoor plants that we get from going outside and gardening?

[0:09:57.0] SR: Well, I definitely get the sense, at least from some of the research that you can create a very – you have another layer of probably sensory items that are happening outdoors and I talk in one portion of my book, which is my favorite passages on the smell of earth and that is something that I never get to smell or have a chance to smell indoors because you are typically using a more sterile potting medium. So that smell of earth is another level.

That probably affects us on a really deep biological level for various different reasons, which I go in and describe in *How to Make a Plant Love You*. So I do think that you have some of your faculties that are removed but you can deepen your levels of engagement and involvement and observation and in many ways, maybe hone in on them a little bit more so because you are present with that plant more indoors. I mean more of us than more of us are spending more time indoors than outdoors.

So we might actually acknowledge and notice those plants in our lives a little bit more than if we did outside where we might have this blur of green if you will. So I do think that it can work both

ways but it is again about creating some of these active observations, these moving meditations that you can develop through the process of caring for a plant.

[0:11:31.4] PF: And how does someone go about developing that? Because if someone is listening to this they're like, "Okay that sounds cool but I have no idea how to do this." Can you explain how to develop this moving meditation of working with your plants?

[0:11:46.6] SR: I do talk about this more in depth in the book but just to start with an active observation, if I shared with somebody to observe this plant, somebody might say, "Oh that's green" but what color? What kind of green is it? You almost have to develop a new type of language again and you know I describe it in a way as like a naturalist who goes out in the forest, you don't have name tags or plant tags out there. You have to actually observe and you begin to say, "Well that's interesting."

"Well why is this leaf speckled in this way and where is it growing?" Is this in a slightly marshy area? Oh it has like a rubbery texture, that's interesting." So you start to begin to use language in a different way in order to be able to look at this plant and start to make stories with yourself as to why it might actually be the way that it is. You know how did it end up there? Why is it under that tree and not under the one ten feet over to the other side?

And even if you are wrong about those stories, even if your hypothesis are wrong, you are actually creating these little synapses to begin to intuit a plant's needs and that is part of what I mean about developing an active observation. Mindful meditation in many ways or moving meditation is that you are like tuning into your plants while you're moving around the house, whether it's clipping their leaves, watering them. You know some people are great meditators.

They can sit, they can clear out their mind and I am not one of those people. I do meditate from time to time but I find that I am the calmest and one of the most cool headed while I am actually doing something and that something is typically that is something that actually calms me and for me, it is caring for my plants. So yeah, I think those are some – there is no blueprint. I mean somebody else is going to find a different way and different methods that work for him or her.

You know the best that I can do is share how I experience it and maybe so it will manifest in someone else's life in a different kind of way.

[0:14:01.2] PF: Sure, that makes perfect sense and you also do talk about the physical benefits that we get from taking care of our plants and again, we think of well, we are taking care of the plants. We don't really think that there are some physical rewards in it for us. Can you touch on what it is that we get from taking care of our plants?

[0:14:17.6] SR: Yeah, well this goes back to some of the psychological benefits as well. You know it calms us, the physical benefits is that it lowers blood pressure. I mean as long as some people have shared with me that when they re-pot it is like a strenuous activity. So maybe their blood pressure is not lower there but in general, lowering your blood pressure, calming your nerves. I mean that whole mind-body-spirit is all connected anyway.

So if you are calm then chances are your blood pressure is going to be lower as well. So if you have calmness of spirit, calmness of mind then it will probably manifest in a positive manner in your physical form too. So you know these are again just people there's been so many incredible studies of people in hospitals. Hospital settings are quite studied a lot just having a view of nature or even a poster with a nature view on it will help people heal faster and these things are what we already know.

But it doesn't necessarily all that peer reviewed science stuff doesn't actually get into our homes but we could begin to deduce the fact that like having green in their homes especially because we are spending so much time there or in our offices is going to make a huge difference.

[0:15:34.6] PF: Yeah and as we see less green outside, it becomes increasingly more important to surround ourselves with it inside.

[0:15:42.4] SR: Yeah, absolutely but there's other insularly benefits that I don't even get into or discuss as much in *How to Make a Plant Love You* but you can intuit through some of the quotes that people share, of the community that have shared their stories. In one way, I could think of the young lady who suffers a little bit more from anxiety and depression and the only time that she would open up the window, she would just – she knew her plants needed light.

But she needed light too and so, she would get up out of bed and open up the shades because she wanted her plants to thrive and in the process of having her plants thrive, she was thriving

too and I just really love that story. It is because we need light as well. We need our daily dose of vitamin D or 15 minutes of vitamin D and if we are giving great conditions for our plants, we are probably giving ourselves great conditions too.

So these are reminders. These two elements are distinctly connected and I think that is just really lovely and really that's *How to Make a Plant Love You* is all about.

[0:16:48.9] PF: That is terrific and so there are people who were just naturally like they can look at a plant and it thrives and flourishes when they bring it home but there are people who are just lousy with them. I was in a garden store this weekend and I overheard a conversation with two women and you would have thought that the one was trying to convince the other to bring home a child because she was like, "No, it is going to die. I don't know how to take care of it. I can't feed it."

You know it was comical and especially knowing that I had this podcast recording coming up. So if you have been eavesdropping like I was, what do you say to someone who's just like, "Plants are too much. I can't take care of them."

[0:17:27.6] SR: Well, you know I would say that there is some type of plant for somebody at some point in their life and that woman may have been at a point in her life that she said, "You know I can't take care of this" and that is fine too because I do think that you have to be self-aware of your own capabilities. You shouldn't be able to – you shouldn't be in a place where she is talking herself out of it because she doesn't feel like she has the skill set and will never have the skillset.

But if she feels like at this point in her life, you know maybe she's travelling all the time and it will be very difficult for her to have a plant in this case then it would feel like a little bit more like a child. However, there are wonderful plants that really thrive under benign neglect and a range of conditions and a range of life and I would probably if I was eaves dropping, ask her the type of plant that she was considering because there are some high maintenance varieties out there and you need to be diligent and honest in order for them to actually thrive let alone survive.

[0:18:32.2] PF: So where should people start, if they are listening to this and they're like, "All right, I need to get some of that good plant juju going in my house and start feeling better" what is a good starting place for people to learn more?

[0:18:45.2] SR: Well I think that if they have a really good garden center and they could feel confident in their garden center then starting with a person in real life is always great. I also have done a playlist on my plant one on me channel on YouTube that is Houseplant 101 back to basics and it really takes you through the step by step of the things that you need to know even before you get into a plant shop. That is going to be very helpful for that person on the other side.

To help direct you to the proper plant and then once you get that plant in your house, there are certain things that you actually need to know. So much more tactical integration. I think *How to Make a Plant Love You* is a bit more of a philosophical and spiritual guide as they mentioned and a way to think about plants in a new way. So that it makes you a better and more proficient at caring for plants, yourself and your community but if you want more tactical information, I would give you those links for sure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[0:19:45.1] PF: That was Summer Rayne Oaks talking to us about how we can benefit from bringing nature indoors. If you would like to learn more about Summer and her book, *How to Make your Plant Love You*, please visit us at livehappynow.com and we'll tell you where you can learn more about Summer's projects and how to follow her online.

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That is all we have time for this week. We'll meet you back here again next week for an all new episode and until then, this is Paula Felps reminding you to make every day a happy one.

[END]