

Killed your CACTUS? Time for a PLANT parenting class

LIKE any new parent, I'm fanatical about health and safety. 'Gently with him!' I bark at my husband, who's lifting our latest household member into the car.

'He can go on my lap. I don't want him squashed.' I marvel at his beauty, and as we drive home, discuss what to call him. His given name, *Rhaphidophora Tetrasperma*, is a bit much. Raffy, perhaps.

I shout to the kids: 'We're back from the garden centre!' We proudly carry in Raffy, two lush ZZ plants, a trailing Golden Pothos, and a shaggy beast of a Philodendron. 'Don't fiddle with the leaves,' I warn the 15-year-old. I barely recognise myself. I love plants, but in my youth killed every one I owned.

I've stayed mostly plant-free since as I felt they deserved better. But at 51, I'm suddenly confident of my nurturing abilities — and it's all thanks to plant coach Nick Cutsumpas whose mission is 'to make cities and people's lives greener and more abundant'.

Nick, 28, is Gwyneth Paltrow's rather dashing (of course!), green-fingered expert of choice. He's one of the guest speakers at her Goop At-Home Summit, an online wellness event launching this Saturday and is thrilled to be in such esteemed company. 'I look on the page, and oh, there's my picture and there's Laura Dern!'

Nick has also featured in *Vogue* and was a contestant in *The Big Flower Fight*, a Netflix show produced by *The Great British Bake Off* creators and recorded in Kent last autumn.

He's quick to say he doesn't have a horticulture qualification, though he's taken classes at the New York Botanical Garden, but growing stuff has always been his passion.

Until last year though, it was a side project. He worked for Arianna Huffington's wellbeing tech company Thrive Global as a client partner, but corporate life didn't spark joy.

And living in a small New York City flat was a shock after growing food in his parents' garden in the suburbs. Nick filled the tiny space with nearly 100 plants. 'It felt like a jungle. It was the only way I knew how to cope.'

HE FOUND his métier through 'trial and error, learning from role models, and doing projects for friends and family.' Last year he became a full-time plant coach and urban gardener. A week ago, he gave me one of his virtual plant coaching consultations, which start from £56.

Prior to our appointment, I glean from his website that 'Farmer Nick empowers future plant parents with the knowledge and confidence they need to create and care for their own sustainable urban jungle.' When we meet on FaceTime for my lesson, I'm feeling unworthy. 'I'm so embarrassed,' I blurt. 'I have one plant in my house.'

'We've got to change that,' he says. I lift my lonely plant to the screen. 'A little succulent!' he says. 'It lives in our bathroom. Its leaves are toothpaste-spattered. I'm a terrible plant parent.'

'No, no,' he smiles. 'As long as we

have the right intentions, it's OK if we're not perfect. I've killed plants. I get lazy, I get busy. It's not about the quantity, it's about the quality of the care you can provide.'

'Everyone has a number. You need to find out what that number is. Because if you have more plants than you can cope with, some will suffer. For me, 100 was too many.'

I feel the weight of responsibility, particularly given the recent news that plants have 'cognitive abilities'. According to researchers at the University of Padua, there's evidence plants can communicate, learn, and make decisions. Great, more sentient beings judging me.

But Nick's encouragement makes me realise I do want to bring more of the outdoors in. I'm not alone. He says the pandemic has prompted many to 'start taking care of their home ecosystem as well as their body and health.'

Nick says: 'There are physical

benefits to having plants, they're releasing oxygen in your space. But I think the mental and emotional impact is much more noticeable. My stress was down, my mood was more positive, and studies show that just having plants in your presence can spark more creativity and productivity.'

Nick asks for a virtual guided tour to see what plants my home will suit. 'People don't kill plants — it's the wrong environments that kill plants most of the time.'

'Occasionally you'll get over-zealous plant parents — helicopter plant parents that really overdo it. Over-watering is the number one reason a human would kill a plant. I always tell them: "Mindful neglect is a good strategy."

'How often should you water plants?' I stammer. Our readership is more knowledgeable. I add hastily, it's just me who's clueless.

He replies: 'I'd say that 90 per cent need water every seven to ten



The plant whisperer: Nick Cutsumpas sharing his expertise and passion online

ANNA MAXTED finds her green fingers with Gwyneth's gardening coach

days,' though that will vary according to light exposure. Some species thrive in direct sunlight, some prefer bright, indirect sunlight, others can tolerate low light.

Before choosing which to get, you should consider 'which way your windows face, and what light you have?' I've got skylights in the attic. That's my direct light.'

Step two is temperature and humidity. Some plants such as ferns, calatheas and palms need a lot of moisture in the air, he says, but you don't necessarily want a humidifier indoors. 'I used to drag my plants into the bathroom when I showered.' Though dragging so many became problematic.

Space and lifestyle are also key. 'There are pets, jobs, inattentive life partners... If your high maintenance Fiddle Leaf Fig doesn't fit with your lifestyle, don't buy one.'

I'm relieved Nick approves of the light in my home. 'A bright space. You've got so many options.' He's talking from his parents' house, as he's moving to Los Angeles. I say, 'Is that a cheese plant behind you?' Yes, he says, the 'Monstera.'

'I like that one,' I say hopefully. I can 'activate' areas of my home that aren't naturally plant friendly, he says. 'My favourite plant hack is to buy two of the same plant, and every week, switch the locations. This ZZ plant is a lower-light plant. It's tolerant of shade, but it won't do as well as it would in some good sun.'

'I put one in a corner with no light. I had another in the sun, and every week I switched them.'

ANOTHER trick is to use artificial light. 'Take a grow light and put a plant right underneath it. It's a nice way of creating plant-growing zones.'

Having observed that my house is full of teenagers and plant-indifferent cats, Nick suggests the *Rhaphidophora Tetrasperma* ('wild looking and it grows vertically, so it won't take up a lot of space'), a Golden Pothos, (it can be deployed on bookcases or shelves, because they trail down and can handle low or high light); the ZZ ('sturdy and resilient'); and the snake plant ('indestructible — put it anywhere and you won't need to water it for four weeks').

He forbids me to order plants online (like mere objects). 'Fine, but before we, the prospective parents, visit a nursery, I have questions. Should I always report?' He recommends it. 'You don't know how long the plants have been in their nursery pots and the roots may be cramped and 'pot-bound.' They wrap around each other, constricting the plant.'

How do I know when I've given them enough water? 'If you have a drainage hole at the bottom of the planter you want to see the water coming through.'

I'm so excited, I purchase every plant suggested, plus compost, pots, and aeration stones (only the best for my darlings).

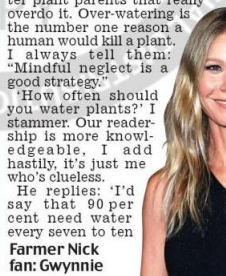
Nick sweetly sends me a snake plant and a dramatic Kentia Palm. 'The place looks more alive,' says my husband happily.

We name them all. Nick approves of anthropomorphising your plants — 'empathy is key to this process.'

I spend hours re-potting — 'it's like they've kept him in a straitjacket!' — fretting about yellow leaves and fussing about position.

'Not there, she needs more light!' I send the midwife, aka Nick, loads of photographs. 'Look at you go!' he says. I'm beaming. I left plant parenthood late, but it's growing on me at last.

■ farmernicknyc.com



Farmer Nick fan: Gwynnie

