

LOS ANGELES (AFP) - Some lonely Americans are eschewing Internet dating and instead putting their faith in feng shui in a bid to find their romantic soul mates.

It is not a common sight yet to see feng shui, the ancient Chinese art of geomancy, advertised as a romance enhancer, but it may not be long before it becomes an accepted part of dating in big cities where singles frequently battle to find love, devoted practitioners say.

People like Los Angeles advertising art director Alicia Schiefer insist that feng shui works to improve one's romantic life.

"It's worth it to do it," she said. Using the peach blossom technique in feng shui, she entered into what she says was a very satisfying long-term relationship.

The 44-year-old Schiefer, who went through a difficult divorce, business doldrums and a death in the family, was on the verge of returning to her native Peru to be near relatives, but a judge barred her taking from her sons out of the country.

The hard times came crashing down as Schiefer hired **Janice Sugita**, a feng shui consultant and interior designer, to jump-start her business.

Sugita, noticing her client's single status, told Schiefer that romance could be hers with a few easy feng shui techniques.

Feng shui is increasingly becoming accepted in the West as a way of increasing business prosperity and maintaining health, harnessing the universal energy of life, or qi, to create a harmonious environment.

"Not only will you be able to improve your surroundings to attract romance, but you can increase your personal energy that will make you feel more energized and attractive," according to Sugita's E-book "The Feng Shui Equation."

The formula for stirring up romantic energy is simple enough. Fresh flowers are placed in water in a wide-necked vase. The color of the flower and the vase must be the same and can be determined by checking a person's birth date on a feng shui chart or by having a reading done.

The chart also determines the best direction for the flower arrangement. Then, one must sit back and wait.

Schiefer lived in a rental for a year and never met anyone. Her peach blossom was in place, but she planned to move. Within a few weeks, a prospective tenant asked to meet her because of how she had decorated the space.

Five years later, she and her partner, Brad Amster, are still together.

"This guy rang my bell. What are the chances you meet someone that comes to your house?" said Schiefer.

Benoit Hug and Ines Beyer have also become believers.

Hug, a baker, was single when he set up his flowers in the bedroom. Three days later, a woman asked him out.

"It was fun to try it out. I had a good experience," he said of the relationship, which lasted a few months.

Within one or two days of putting her flowers in place, Beyer says she got a call from an ex-boyfriend.

One week later, two men she had met earlier called her.

Feng shui practitioners point out that the technique does have its down side. The random personal attraction created can bring ex-boyfriends and ex-husbands back on the scene.

"It only improves what you were meant to have," said Betty Stone, assistant to Feng Shui Master Larry Sang of the American Feng Shui Institute.

But if you ask Pat Linse, co-founder of the Skeptics Society, an organization devoted to the promotion and better understanding of science, she will not be giving up Internet dating anytime soon.

To her, feng shui romance sounds "charming and poetic. It appeals to the emotions. It could make a person happier and more receptive to a relationship."

Linse said it would be interesting to test the technique scientifically by gathering 100 people who do not know the ritual and having 50 of them practice the correct ritual while showing the wrong ritual to the other 50, and then observing whether there is a difference in the groups' outcomes.

Meanwhile, enthusiasts of the ancient art are finding that they can increase their understanding by doing a feng shui travel tour.

The 10-day tour, organized by Feng Shui Masters, takes the faithful to a series of ancient sites in China that represent feng shui's early beginnings.

Locations are beautifully landscaped in accordance with feng shui principles, and special lecturers explain their significance along the way.

"Each person has a different reaction (to the trip), depending on their cultural background," said Johnathan Ng, executive director of Feng Shui Masters.

"A visit to the Hangzhou temple has moved people to tears," he said. "They feel so great, so very positive."