



EMILY THOMAS
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THE **Wild** HANDBOOK

SEASONAL ACTIVITIES TO
HELP YOU RECONNECT
WITH NATURE

THE
Wild
HANDBOOK

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CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION	9
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SPRING

EARTHING	12-13
FLING OPEN YOUR WINDOWS	14
DIGITAL DETOX	15
COMBAT SPRING FATIGUE	16
GET CREATIVE OUTSIDE	17
THE POWER OF BLUE/DAFFODIL LOVE	18
BLOSSOM WATCH	19
BIRD SPOTTING	20
MAKE A BIRD FEEDER	21
SPRING SCAVENGER HUNT	22-23
MAKE A SPRING WREATH	24-25
VISIT A PUBLIC GARDEN	26
VIRTUAL GARDENS	27
FOREST BATHING	28-29
WINDOW LEDGE HERBS, FLOWERS AND VEG	30-31
WILDFLOWER FOOD FORAGE	32-33
THE SEA, THE SEA!	34-35
CYCLE AWAY THE COBWEBS	36-37
CHASE THE BIRD CHORUS	38-39
GET INVOLVED IN ALLOTMENTS	40
AWESOME AWE WALKS	41
HULA HULA!	42-43
SPRING BRANCH DÉCOR	44
SPRING PHOTOSHOOT	45

SUMMER

WILD SWIMMING	48-49
WELCOME THE SUN	50-51
BEACHCOMBING	52-53
SUMMER JOURNAL	54
MAKE A BIRD BATH	55
JOIN A COMMUNITY GARDEN	56
MAKE A FLOWER CHAIN	57
TREE SPOTTING AND PLANTING	58
PLANTING THE FUTURE	59
LET'S GO CAMPING	60-61
FRUIT PICKING	62-63
ANYONE FOR CROQUET?	64
MOONBATHING	65
IMMERSE YOURSELF IN LAVENDER	66
MAKE A SUMMER FLOWER PRESS	67
MAKE A MIDSUMMER CROWN	68
FORAGE FOR ELDERFLOWER	69
POND DIPPING	70-71
BUTTERFLY SPOTTING	72
CLOUD HUNTING	73
BEFRIENDING OUR BEES	74-75
INSECT WATCH	76-77
BAT WALKING	78
CARING FOR FROGS	79
WATCH THE SUN SET	80
AL FRESCO DINING	81
BECOME A NATURE CONSERVATION VOLUNTEER	82-83
SUMMER PHOTOSHOOT	84-85



AUTUMN

AUTUMN HEALING	88-89
EMBRACE THE EQUINOX	90-91
TREASURE AUTUMN FALL	92
LEAF LANTERN	93
VOLUNTEER AT AN URBAN ORCHARD	94-95
HELP OUT AT A CARE FARM	96-97
DONKEY THERAPY	98
SPOT A STARLING MURMURATION	99
TAKE UP TAI CHI	100
PRACTISE YOGA OUTSIDE	101
GET A PET	102
RESCUE OR FOSTER AN ANIMAL	103
ALL THE PRETTY HORSES	104-105
BUILD A WILDLIFE HOTEL	106-107
TAKE A TRAIN TRIP	108
VOLUNTEER ON AN ARABLE FARM	109
CUDDLE WITH PIGS	110
GUINEA PIG THERAPY	111
PINE CONE BOWLING	112
CREATE AN AUTUMN MOOD JOURNAL	113
PING PONG	114
FLY A KITE	115
FORAGE FOR AUTUMN DÉCOR	116
PRESERVING BERRIES AND FLOWERS	117
PUMPKIN PICKING	118
PUMPKIN POWER	119
VISIT A HISTORIC HOUSE AND GROUNDS	120
ESCAPE TO A NATIONAL PARK	121
COMMUNITY CARING OUTSIDE	122-123

BECOME A RAMBLER	124
JOIN IN WITH A PARK WALK	125
PREPARING FOR DARKER MONTHS	126-127

WINTER

STARGAZING	130-131
MAKE A HOLIDAY WREATH	132-133
TECH HABITS TO LIFT YOUR MOOD	134
VISIT A DRAMATIC LANDSCAPE	135
MOSS SPOTTING	136
WANDER THROUGH A PINE FOREST	137
SURF'S UP!	138-139
PURIFY YOUR HOME	140
BRING ESSENTIAL OILS INTO YOUR LIFE	141
CHASE A STORM	142-143
LET'S GO TRIG BAGGING	144
VISIT A CITY FARM	145
GET ENGAGED WITH BIODOMES	146
GO SLEDGING	147
BATHS, SPAS AND SAUNAS	148
MAKE BEAUTIFUL BATH SALTS	149
CELEBRATE THE WINTER SOLSTICE	150
SOLSTICE GINGERBREAD	151
FLOWERS IN ICE	152
ORGANISE A WINTER TREASURE HUNT	153
UPDATE YOUR DÉCOR	154
ADAPT YOUR ROUTINES	155
NURTURING THE EARTH	156
GIVE NATURE A HELPING HAND	157
WINTER PHOTOSHOOT	158-159





INTRODUCTION

The Wild Handbook began to take shape some months into the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a time of significant change for many of us – we found ourselves confined to our homes for most of the day, allowed out only for food shopping and limited daily exercise. We couldn't meet our friends in cafés, bars or restaurants and we had to keep our distance from anyone not in our household.

But, during all this uncertainty, one thing remained the same: the natural world. Our gardens, parks, woodlands, rivers, lakes and seas were all still there for us to enjoy. With more time on our hands, many of us realised how the stresses of modern life had gradually pulled us away from the natural world, and we began to find little ways to reconnect with nature. We discovered a newfound appreciation for the beauty and healing power of the natural world – we took comfort in the early morning dawn chorus, the sound of bees buzzing and pollinating and the simple joy of eating a meal outdoors.

We've created *The Wild Handbook* to help you reconnect with nature and improve your physical and mental wellbeing in the process. It's a book you can dip in and out of when the mood strikes, or devour in one sitting. Organised by season, there are activity ideas to suit everyone, no matter your location, budget or level of fitness. From filling your home with natural décor and essential oils, learning to grow herbs and vegetables on a windowsill and spending an afternoon forest bathing, to moonbathing, walking through a snowstorm and wild swimming, you'll find plenty of ideas to suit your lifestyle.

This handbook will help you to live your very best life, in harmony with the natural world.



SPRING

EARTHING

Earthing, or 'barefoot healing' is a real thing! It's a no-lose way to boost health, and a great introduction to nature exploration. Earthing is thought to be beneficial to our physical health, and it encourages mental and emotional equilibrium, too.

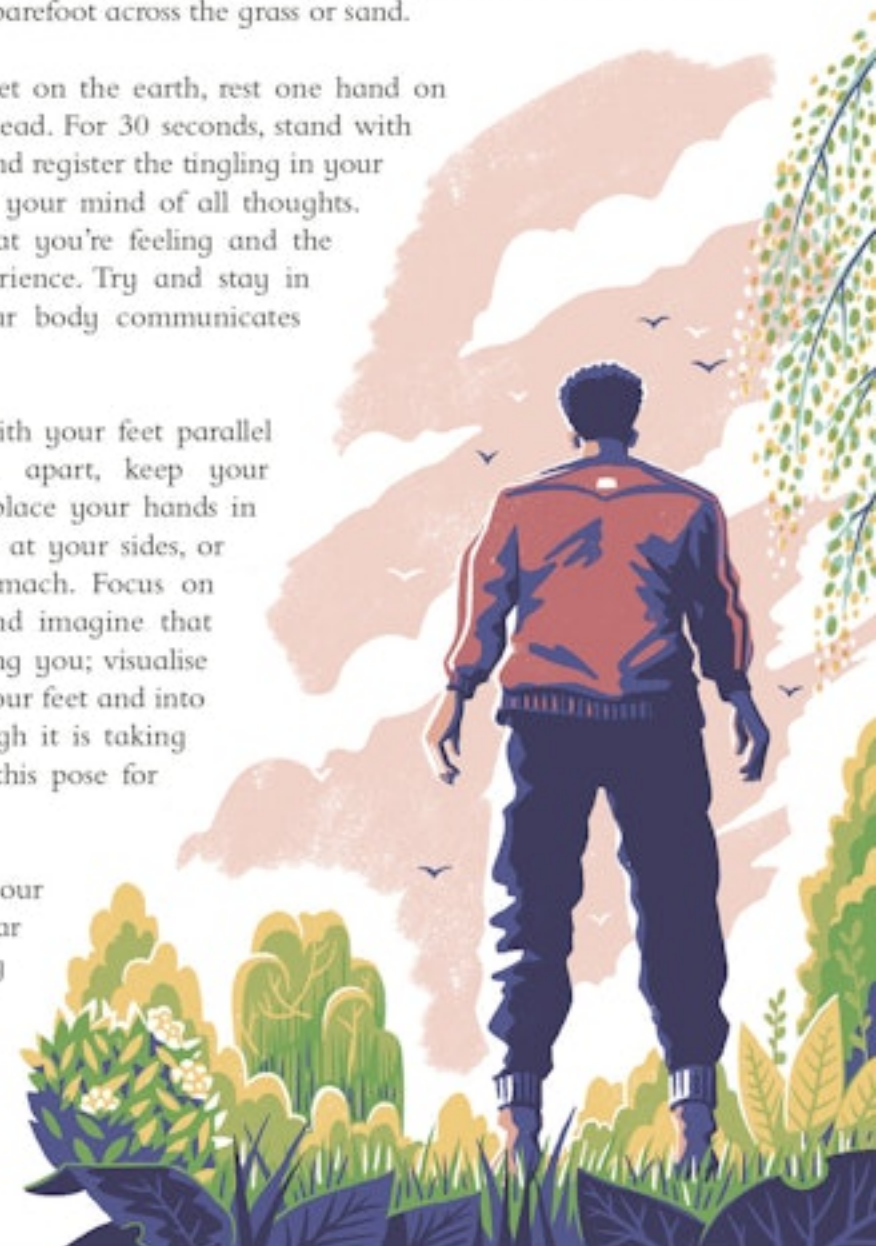
After the rigours of winter, our bodies need some respite from months of going head to head with common cold and flu viruses, and working hard to keep us warm and protected against the harsher temperatures. Through our close connection to the earth, we are treating ourselves to the equivalent of a spring clean, rebooting our tired immune system for the new season.

Earthing works when we connect bare feet to earth and allow nature's electrical charge to rebalance our own atomic electricity. This is important for our immune system's defence against injury and illness, much as antioxidants are. There are myriad reasons why we can be thrown off electrical balance: too much hard exercise, cardiovascular illness or issues, winter hibernation, lapses in good diet, stress and anxiety and emotional trauma or distress. All of these life or lifestyle challenges can drain our natural battery, and require us to recharge. Earthing helps us to heal, reduces pain and inflammation, and wakes us up.



HOW TO ACHIEVE OPTIMUM EARTHING

1. Find a tranquil space outside such as a garden, park or beach. Set out early to limit social contact, but take a friend if you like. Make sure you dress for the weather, with easily removeable socks and shoes.
2. Check that the ground is safe to walk on barefoot. Try and choose areas where the grass is short, or the sand is dense, flat and smooth, and where hidden dangers, such as glass, sharp rocks or stones and any other nasties are visible and so avoidable.
3. Take off your shoes and socks, and start with some playful exploration; try running or walking barefoot across the grass or sand.
4. With your naked feet on the earth, rest one hand on the crown of your head. For 30 seconds, stand with your back straight and register the tingling in your feet. Try and empty your mind of all thoughts. Concentrate on what you're feeling and the sensations you experience. Try and stay in each second as your body communicates with the ground.
5. Stand like a tree. With your feet parallel and shoulder-width apart, keep your back straight, then place your hands in a natural position – at your sides, or resting on your stomach. Focus on your bodyweight and imagine that any tension is leaving you; visualise it sinking down to your feet and into the ground, as though it is taking root. You can hold this pose for up to 10 minutes.
6. If possible, make your Earthing a regular weekly or monthly practice.



FLING OPEN YOUR WINDOWS

The long, chilly, dark days of winter have finally come to an end. The mornings are starting to get lighter and nature is waking up. We're often a little slow and sleepy when it comes to embracing spring and it can take us a while to notice what's occurring in the world outside, but we can mark our entry into this most hopeful and delicate new season by letting some of what's outside into our homes.



1. Grab a sweater and fling open a window that offers a good view, even if that's just a couple of treetops looming overhead or a space between blocks of flats.
2. Sit or stand by the window, or safely lean out of it, and let your senses absorb the weather. Allow the breeze to touch and awaken your skin. If it's raining, shut your eyes and listen. Rain can be incredibly calming, and it is deeply nurturing for the earth; shed any negative associations with rain and concentrate on how it sounds as you think about its crucial role in nature.
3. If you have access to a garden or outdoor space, notice the colours of the grass and flowers, and what you can smell. Take in the brown leaves turning to green, the dew on the grass, perhaps some early blossom on trees, and scan for the sight of spring flowers.
4. There are things to see even if you don't have a garden or much green space nearby, and urban areas can be quite interesting in spring. Look up at the sky and you will see birds. You may also spot other wildlife or the odd fox at ground level, too. Wildlife tends to be visible early in the morning.
5. If meditation is your thing, practise it in front of your open window. Empty your head of any worrying or stressful thoughts and focus on your breath or on the sounds of nature instead.



Let spring soothe you for a few minutes before you go about your day.

DIGITAL DETOX

We love our devices and they're invaluable tools for modern life; they make our professional and social lives easier and give us quick access to important information. If used moderately, social media can be a great way to keep in touch with our friends, as well as keeping us informed about current affairs and news. It also gives us a platform to share our feelings and what's happening in our own lives. It can help us feel more connected and stave off loneliness, but it can be very easy to replace real life activities with incessant scrolling and tapping on our phones. Constant monitoring of what people are doing and saying, or how they look, can make us feel inadequate, unnecessarily competitive and frazzled – without us even realising it. If we overindulge, screen time can make us feel irritable and lethargic, and can wear down our sense of individuality – all before we've had breakfast! Our heads are buzzing with visual information overload, and by the end of the day we can feel drained, agitated, suffer from fuzzy vision and find ourselves unable to sleep well. It's time for a digital detox.



1. Set aside some time to eliminate the apps on your phone that you rarely use, leaving your screen uncluttered. This way, you'll only have access to the services you genuinely need.
2. Unless you absolutely need to be on call for something, make it a rule to switch off your phone or device an hour before you go to sleep. Ideally, leave it outside your bedroom, where you can't reach for it and turn it on again. Try not to switch it on in the morning until after you've had breakfast.
3. If you use your phone to check work emails, make sure you turn notifications off out of working hours and all weekend. Notifications can make us feel like we have to answer emails immediately, no matter the time of day, but we don't!
4. If you're a social-media fan, spring is a good time to ease off or give yourself a break. Work out a schedule for checking platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Allow one hour per day, spread across the entire day. If one of your media apps tends to leave you feeling down more often than not, then consider deactivating it for a while. Your world will not fall apart as a result; most likely you'll feel lighter, calmer, more refreshed and alert, and ready to engage IRL.

COMBAT SPRING FATIGUE

In spring, we're told we should feel great because the sun is shining and new life is blooming, but we might be feeling tired, irritable, more prone to headaches and generally a bit down. This counter-intuitive response is referred to as Seasonal Affective Disorder and it's to do with our hormones adjusting to nature. During the winter months we produce more melatonin – the sleep hormone – but as the days get lighter and longer, this hormone is overlaid by another one: serotonin – the hormone that wakes us up. As our body slowly switches from melatonin to serotonin, the adjustment leaves us lethargic and tetchy. The good news is, there are ways to combat the physical and mental effects of spring fatigue. Here are some ideas.

1. Gradually increase the amount of time you spend outdoors. If you have a garden, take a drink outside and sit in nature for 20 minutes before the day begins. Turn your face up to the sky and focus on your breathing, on birdsong or on the rustle of wildlife. If you don't have outside space, grab a travel mug or flask and go for a walk. Turn your wrists up to the sun for optimum absorption of vitamin D via the delicate skin there.

2. Certain carb-laden foods release sugar too quickly, leaving us lethargic, so start the day with slow-release carbs such as porridge oats, and antioxidant fruits like blueberries. Check out spring's seasonal fruits and vegetables and make sure you're well stocked. Put almonds, cashews and Brazil nuts on your shopping list, too, as between them they contain vital vitamin E, iron, zinc, selenium and magnesium, as well as fibre. Limit sugar-rich food, but don't deprive yourself of the odd treat; you'll only crave it more! Keep yourself well hydrated throughout the day.

3. Exercise more. Take a walk in your local park or nearby countryside – somewhere hilly rather than flat is ideal. Go for a swim, a bike ride, or play badminton or tennis. Walk home with your shopping rather than driving or getting the bus. Climb those stairs instead of taking the lift. Set yourself a goal of half an hour of movement a day, and remember all movement is good. If you find it hard to motivate yourself this way, plan to exercise with a friend.



GET CREATIVE OUTSIDE

Tapping in to our creative brain doesn't require special expertise or skill. Remember how happy we felt as small children, with paints and crayons, or a pen and paper, as we created our mini-masterpieces – it was so easy to lose ourselves in the activity. But as we get older we become more self-conscious, more concerned with how well we create rather than how the act of creating makes us feel. Lots of adults simply don't bother being creative because we don't think we'll be any good.

But we're missing the point: creativity is simply expression. Expressing ourselves, whether through writing something down, playing an instrument, making something out of clay or creating a meal, is good for the soul. The joy is in the task, and once we shed our inhibitions and our need to be perfect, the feeling of wellbeing that comes with organic creativity puts us in touch with profound pleasure. Spring's colours, sights and smells provide excellent inspiration. If it's sketching you're, er, drawn to, you don't need expensive paints or pencils to create something wonderful. Whether you don a beret and sit by a tranquil river painting ducks, or take a blank notebook and a pen or pencil and spend your lunch hour on a park bench writing down the first few lines of a story, you're kick-starting your creative gene, with nature as your muse.

Don't put pressure on yourself to achieve too much too quickly. Allow yourself to sit and observe what's around you, try and empty your mind of practical or anxious thoughts and everyday obstacles. Instead, focus on how you feel. Are you drawn to something in particular? Start slowly and either sketch it with a pencil or jot down your thoughts. If you're keen to write creatively, sit and allow inspiration to come for the first line of your book.

Don't judge what you've done with negativity. Resist scoring yourself or throwing away your work in a fit of frustration. If your mind goes blank, let it. Getting annoyed with yourself only reverses the positive effects of endeavour. Give yourself permission to pause, put your work in progress away and return to it with a clear head another time.



THE POWER OF BLUE

Walking through a bluebell wood is widely believed to reduce our levels of cortisol – the stress hormone – as well as boost the immune system. And the colour of bluebells contains its own special superpower, as blue is a naturally soothing and stress-busting colour.

Bluebell woods can be found everywhere, so you likely won't have to travel far to find one. In Britain, there is a small window of time for you to see bluebells, ranging from early February to the end of March, depending on how long and cold the winter has been. A mild February will see bluebells flower and vanish early, while an extended cold snap means they will come up later. Keep an eye on the weather, and be prepared for a spontaneous bluebell-wood dash!



DAFFODIL LOVE

The Common Daffodil, also known as the Trumpet Narcissus, is common in Northern Europe, but grows anywhere in the world with a cooler climate. Often a vivid yellow, daffodils are the classic symbol of spring. Author A.A. Milne referred to them as 'sun bonnets' and poet William Wordsworth was so convinced of their uplifting power that he wrote a poem, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud', in homage to them. If you visit Britain's Lake District in spring, you'll see why he was so inspired – in this region they are glorious and abundant. Daffodils can also be white (with contrasting yellow inner petals), pink and even orange. Stop and take notice of these beauties; they are often taken for granted as they are so common. Make it a mission to seek out the different varieties, photograph them and add them to your Instagram spring journal. You can grow your own, too, and they will even thrive on an indoor window ledge if you don't have a garden. Plant bulbs in the autumn, and watch them bloom in late winter or early spring. Be careful not to touch the inner petals too much, though, as they can cause an allergic reaction.



BLOSSOM WATCH

There isn't much that beats the sight of blossom after months of winter's bare trees and subdued colours. Blossom is a symbol of new life, and it's not fussy about where it grows: you'll find it in parks, in streets or in your back garden. There are many different types, from apple and cherry to hawthorn and elderflower – and, of course, the stunning magnolia. Blossom is reassuring when our lives feel uncertain, serenading us with its impossibly pretty colours, reminding us of the beauty in the world, inspiring gratitude and optimism and letting us know that there are warmer days to come. In Japan, blossom is worshipped with the ritual custom of *Hanami* – 'flower viewing' – with a focus on cherry blossom and the belief that observation and appreciation of beauty has a reciprocal effect on our souls, encouraging inner beauty, too.

Blossoming trees are not just easy on the eye – they support wildlife and insect pollination, and they literally blossom in the warmth of spring air, which fluffs up their petals and encourages birds to sit among their branches.

Keeping a blossom-watch journal can be an uplifting spring activity. You could maintain a dedicated photo-record of these natural anti-depressants, and chart your state of mind as spring progresses.



BIRD SPOTTING

Spring is the time to reboot your brain after months of the harshest season; during winter we tend to focus on keeping warm, and perhaps over-indulge in food and alcohol as a way to cope with the darker skies, shorter days and winter viruses. We can emerge tired and emotionally low. No wonder we start dreaming of holidays abroad, or spa breaks at this time of year. What many of us overlook is that there is a natural remedy to the winter blues that centres on what's above and around us: bird-watching. Engaging with these incredible creatures encourages gratitude, calm and perspective as we marvel at their colours, physicality and sounds. Bird-watching is not a mysterious art, nor does it require dressing in an anorak and hiding in a shrub for hours with a pair of binoculars. All you really need are your eyes and a little preparation beforehand, so you know how to recognise different species.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR BIRD-WATCHING

1. Do a little research into the birds that will be in season where you live. The birds that gather in urban areas will be different to those gathering in rural areas, and different birds come and go at different times of the day, as well as throughout the year. Make a list of the birds you want to look out for, including size and colouring, and take this with you so you can refer to it.
2. Check a weather app before you head out, so you can make sure you're properly dressed. Always wear comfortable, enduring footwear. Layering your clothes is never a bad idea, nor is having a pair of gloves, a waterproof jacket and sunscreen in your backpack.
3. Pack a rucksack with some handy bird-watching tools: binoculars and a field guide will help optimise your experience. A camera is a good idea, though if you have a smart phone, that will suffice. You'll need a portable charger for your devices, and some snacks and drink to keep you fuelled and hydrated.

If you're lucky and manage to take some decent photos, you can create a bird album. If you commit to bird-watching, it won't be long before you're impressing your friends with your knowledge and noticing how good it makes you feel.



MAKE A BIRD FEEDER

Unsurprisingly, birds' natural food supply is harder to come by in the colder months of winter and spring, but it's a good idea to help out our feathered friends all year round by setting up a bird feeder in your garden or on a decent-sized window ledge. You can buy them, but it's much more satisfying to make your own. If you know what you're doing, you can adapt your feeding stations to attract different kinds of birds. Modern farming methods and an increase in tidy gardens (and so a decrease in wild gardens) mean that we see fewer birds such as finches, buntings or sparrows as they are not drawn to these unnatural spaces. Sunflower seeds are safe for all of these species, but do your research on the best food for different birds. Be patient, and wait for wary birds to discover your food source. Once they realise you're friendly, they'll start visiting regularly. Feel the glow of taking care of precious wildlife!

MAKING YOUR BIRD TABLE

1. You'll need some basic tools to put your table together: nails, hooks, a hammer and some sandpaper. Seek expert advice if you're new to woodwork.
2. Buy some solid and sustainable wood that won't crack or get damaged by the rain or harsher weather. Seek advice from a timber merchant, if you can. Ideally the wood should be between half a centimetre and a centimetre in thickness.
3. Try to make your table as big as possible, to avoid a posse of birds competing with each other for food and putting off the more timid varieties.
4. To keep the food safely on your table, create a rim about one centimetre high around the edge, leaving corner gaps so that rain can drain away. This will also make cleaning the table easier.
5. Before you put your feeder table together, sand down the wood to remove cracks and crevices that could harbour dirt, leading to disease or infection. It's not advisable to treat or varnish the wood, but, if you must, then use a water-based treatment and be sure it is completely dry before the table is used.
6. Add some nails or hooks on the side of the table to hang a bags of nuts and seeds from. You could also make a roof for your table, which provides protection from predatory birds such as hunting sparrowhawks, and keeps the food dry.



SPRING SCAVENGER HUNT



Scavenger hunts aren't just for kids: this fun activity helps to put us all in touch with nature. We can feel the stresses of life fade away, replaced by the delight of identifying seasonal wildlife, plants and flowers in both urban and rural areas. With the bounty of new life appearing around us, spring is a great time to embark on a scavenger hunt, but you can make them a seasonal event. To prepare, simply research the items you might find; it will be all the more satisfying if you know beforehand which seasonal items you're looking for. Put together a checklist and take it with you, bearing in mind that your list will vary depending on where you live. If you're feeling particularly ambitious, you could turn your scavenger hunt into a mini-break. If you live in a big city, you could take a trip somewhere with a dramatically different landscape and combine it with a staycation.

Learn how to spot a chiffchaff, a tree bee, some dog willow or wild garlic. Open your eyes to the world around you, and give your busy, buzzing brain something supremely soothing and satisfying to focus on. You can collect souvenirs of your scavenge, too. Leaves and branches, flowers (though check you can pick them first) and treefall, and then turn to pages 24-25 and 44 to learn how to craft these items into beautiful spring décor for your home.



1. First, decide where you're going to go on your spring hunt. If you're a city or town dweller with limited funds, keep it local. If you are able to travel, make sure you research how crowded your chosen destination might be. If you're not keen on encountering hordes of kids on their school holidays, then plan your scavenger hunt during term time.
2. Check out weather conditions and temperatures in your chosen area, as well as what sort of terrain you'll encounter, then dress accordingly. Pack a bag with a phone charger, some food and drink, gloves and binoculars if you can get hold of them – and something foldable and portable to safely keep your finds in.
3. Once you've researched the nature and wildlife that's native to your chosen destination, make a note of how to recognise it. Try to include as much detail as you can: distinct colours, shapes, markings, smells and sounds. Everyone knows what badgers look like, but goat willow is perhaps not quite so familiar.
4. Be respectful of nature. Don't go barging into an area, upsetting wildlife and trampling over plants. Be gentle and cautious. Most wild animals in the UK won't hurt you, but they might be frightened of you, so tread carefully around them. And some plants and flowers may be harmful if you touch them. Make a note of things to be wary or protective of and handle with care!

MAKE A SPRING WREATH

The colours and smells of spring are evidence of nature getting ready to bloom and begin its cycle again, and they can bring such pleasure. Spring marks the end of the harsher winter months and signals optimism, as we look forward to peeling off the layers and immersing ourselves in the great outdoors again. One way to keep in touch with nature at this time of year is by keeping a little of it in our homes. Making a spring wreath to hang on a door or wall is a great way to combine nature with creativity. We can combine the treasures we find outside – wood, leaves and flowers – to make a glorious spring halo, reminding us what this incredible season has to offer and how instantly it lifts our mood.

The great thing about making your own wreath is that you are crafting something unique: selecting your favourite forages from outside and weaving them together to suit your own style. Some people like ornate, showy wreaths with burlap ribbons; others prefer wilder, more natural-looking rings. Whatever your style, you can create a wreath to suit you, and bring a little spring joy to your friends and family, too.

Since there are many different methods for this craft, there are also many online tutorials to choose from. You'll be able to find one that suits your location and the kinds of things you might find nearby, as well as what sort of accessories you can use. The willow-wreath guide opposite is just one idea. You can substitute twigs, vines or other natural materials for the willow – you just need to make sure that the wood is supple enough to bend when you start making your hoop. Dogwood and beech are naturally supple, but you can also use roots or vines such as grapevine, ivy or clematis.



WEAVING YOUR SPRING WILLOW WREATH

1. You'll need a pair of secateurs for cutting your willow, flowers and leaves.
2. Source your willow – you're going to need around ten to twelve whips (branches). You can cut from a weeping or standard willow tree, but if the wood is dry, you'll need to hydrate it by soaking it for a few hours, so that it doesn't crack or split when you start making your wreath base.
3. Strip the leaves from your willow stems – the stems should be around one to one and a half metres in length.
4. Your willow stems will be different sizes – some will be fatter than others. Start your weave with the skinnier ones and then add in the thicker stems.
5. Start to weave your stems together to make a hoop in your desired size. With your first stem, make sure to leave at least six inches sticking out for wrapping to the hoop with twine or wire to hold it in place.
6. Keep turning and shaping your willow stems around each other. It won't be long before the stems weave flexibly together to create a sturdy hoop.
7. If you're adding flowers, keep your willow hoop to three or four stems woven together so that you have room to incorporate the flowers. Tuck in and snip any willow stems that are sticking out, securing your hoop.
8. Now forage for your spring leaves and flowers. Hardier roses, daffodils, forsythia and lavender are good for decoration. Flowers with stronger stems are best.
9. You will need your secateurs to cut flowers and foliage, but keep the stems on all leaves and flowers as long as possible to help you insert them between your willow. Cut off any brown or wilting foliage.
10. Position your spring halo wherever you want it in your home. And remember, you can change your flowers when they wilt, and reuse your willow wreath hoop by drying it out.



VISIT A PUBLIC GARDEN

Spending time in a garden, whether it belongs to you or not, is known to lift the mood, decrease anxiety and improve physical and mental health. For one thing, increasing your exposure to vitamin D is vital for storing calcium, which you need for your bones and for strengthening your immune system. Nature really is an organic antidepressant. At times of abnormal stress, such as the global COVID-19 pandemic, many people reported that spending time in beautiful outside spaces (when access was permitted) significantly boosted their mood and proved an invaluable coping strategy. One survey found that even just standing on a balcony could significantly decrease levels of stress and ward off depression.

Public gardens are very often attached to a big house like a grand stately home or a palace, and they can be found all over the world. In the UK, visitors can enjoy the spectacular grounds of Lyme Park in Cheshire (often used for filming period dramas), Hampton Court (King Henry VIII's home) in Kingston-upon-Thames or the majestic Chatsworth House in Derbyshire. There are many National Trust and English Heritage houses in Britain whose gardens are open to the public throughout the year, giving you the opportunity to spend a day marvelling at the extraordinary flowerbeds, trees and topiary. You might feel you've gone back in time as you stroll around acres of land, with no modern buildings or vehicles in sight. It's a wonderful way to experience the simplicity of, and the skill required to maintain a beautiful public or botanical garden.

Wherever you live you will find gardens to visit. You can find out online what times of year the gardens are open and the best times to visit them, as well as which are free to visit and which require donations or entry fees. There's something for everyone; public gardens are there for all to enjoy.

VIRTUAL GARDENS



If you're not able to go out much, or at all, you can now enjoy a virtual garden or gardening experience! Virtual garden tours became very popular when people were stuck at home during 2020's various lockdowns, offering a state-of-the-art view of nature, bringing the sights and sounds of the garden into many people's homes, and often inspiring a new appreciation for horticulture. There are also virtual gardening courses to be found online, which offer practical, step-by-step lessons on how to design and plant your own garden.



FOREST BATHING

In Japan, they call it *Shinrin-yoku*: 'forest bath'. For decades, the Japanese have considered forest bathing a vital part of preventative healthcare: good for body and soul. Japanese doctors endorse the practice, not only as a stress-relieving antidote to the physical and mental toll of a busy, pressured lifestyle, but as a bona fide weapon against illnesses such as heart disease and cancer. Western doctors are getting on board, too. There is no downside to this activity!

Forest bathing does not mean actual bathing, nor does it involve water. It is the immersion of all five of our senses in the forest experience. Spending time under a leafy canopy, inhaling the unpolluted air, absorbing the sounds and smells, is a good enough mood-booster in and of itself, but the real secret lies in phytoncides. These chemicals are released by plants and trees, and are found to greatly boost the immune system and our levels of serotonin (our stress-combatting hormone).

There is some commitment required with forest bathing. Half an hour spent walking through trees won't really give you the full benefit, and in Japan, people can spend up to three days in a forest. You don't need to spend that long, but try to make time for a whole morning or afternoon in the forest or woody park of your choice.



YOUR FOREST THERAPY

1. Ideally, choose a day with dry weather. The fresh, cool air of spring is perfect as it makes it easy to breathe and move. Dress accordingly; feeling too hot or too cold may hamper your enjoyment.
2. Switch off your devices when you arrive at your destination. Without the distraction of a camera or a phone, you can devote yourself fully to being in the moment. If you are going with a friend, agree not to talk until you leave.
3. Allow yourself to explore the space at a walk, taking in the sights and sounds around you. Trust your mind and body to take you where they want to go.
4. Observe the detail of the trees and plants, and nature's extraordinary designs. Notice how your body moves and how the ground feels beneath your feet.
5. Find somewhere comfortable and dry to sit or lie down, and listen closely to the sounds all around you. Birds and other wildlife surround you, and they are sensitive to your presence. Be respectful towards them – notice how they respond to you, and how their behaviour might change as they adapt to you.
6. In this atmosphere of tranquility, focus only on what is happening in the moment. We are too used to thinking ahead and letting our thoughts spiral. By not allowing ourselves to project or plan, we are giving our minds a rest.



WINDOW LEDGE HERBS, FLOWERS AND VEG

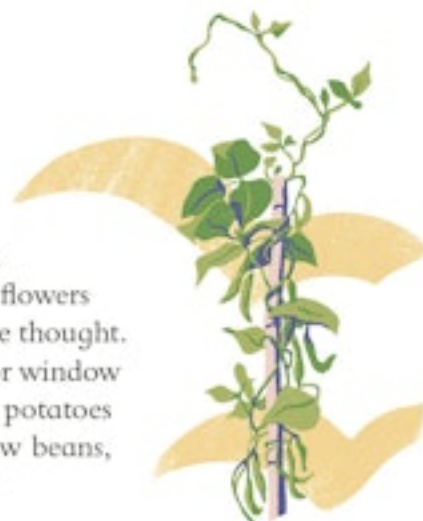
There is little to beat the satisfaction of growing herbs, vegetables and flowers yourself. From cress and tomatoes to geraniums and hyacinths, growing stuff on our window ledge is a wonderful way to create a sense of achievement and agency when we might be feeling powerless, as well as keeping us in touch with the natural world. Sprinkling your own parsley on an omelette or tucking in to a plate of mozzarella with those small, tasty tomatoes you picked from your window box can bring great pleasure.

If you have your own outdoor space, you're one of the lucky ones. If not, congratulate yourself on your resourcefulness: you're about to take a small space and turn it into a garden. Planting and cultivating from seeds or bulbs is always possible, even if you have limited outdoor space. All you need is enough room for decent-sized containers, sunlight, water, compost, small rocks or stones, and some plant food. And spring is the time to start planting. Home growing does not initially require special containers; you can plant seeds in empty egg boxes, or yoghurt pots, or use folded cardboard toilet rolls as a biodegradable, sustainable solution before moving to bigger pots. Though you can start a seed off indoors, most need sunlight, so exposing them to daylight is important.



THE PREP

1. Do a little research to find out what you can realistically grow in your window box. Herbs and flowers are pretty straightforward, but vegetables need more thought. Carrots, pea-shoots and tomatoes are all suitable for window ledges. Other larger veg such as courgettes and potatoes need more room, so they won't work. You can grow beans, but you'll need to provide a pole to support them.
2. If you'll mostly be growing herbs and flowers, you won't need huge pots, but make sure they are heavy or weighted down enough so that they won't be blown off by a strong wind. Consider also how much weight your ledge can withstand. If you live high up, consider your downstairs neighbours, too. Your local garden centre will give you good advice on growing herbs and flowers, and you can buy seeds online, in garden centres and in some supermarkets.
3. Assess the conditions of your outdoor space. When and how often does it get the sun? Is it exposed to the elements or overshadowed by other buildings? The plants you choose need to be able to survive in your particular conditions. You can research this online, but the good news is that most herbs and plants such as lavender are hardy and easy to nurture.
4. For good quantities of vegetables, choose the deepest pots you can for the size of your windowsill. They will need to be a minimum of 15 cm deep, but ideally 20 or even 30 cm. You can improvise by using a large tin or a non-plastic household container. Choosing different types of containers for different seeds will help you tell your sprouting veg apart, too.
5. You'll need compost that's designed for your pot – one that will hold water better and contains vital nutrients for growth. Consult with online or garden centre experts to source this, but loam-based compost is ideal.
6. Put a layer of stones in the base of your pot for water to drain through, then add the compost, patting it down firmly. Now you can add water: just enough to make the compost moist.
7. Water and feed your plants. Water often, but don't go crazy and drown your budding veg. To check moisture levels, put a finger down just beneath the surface of the compost – it should feel slightly moist, but not wet. For feeding, buy a liquid food and add at least once every two weeks.



WILDFLOWER FOOD FORAGE

Many wild plants and flowers are edible and can be used in cooking, and spring is the perfect season to start looking for them. You can discover the full list of items that can be found in spring by researching online, but here a few suggestions to kick things off.

Earlier in spring, you'll find chickweed: one of nature's tasty secrets, which is packed with vitamins and minerals and is delicious in salads. The dandelion (*dent de lion* – or 'lion's tooth') is a versatile flower and every part of it can be used in cooking. Its unopened buds can even be put into sauces to give a tang, much like a caper does. Gorse, often found on clifftops, is famous for its coconut and almond tasting flowers. And Japanese knotweed – a notorious problem for horticulturists – is vitamin rich. You'll be doing gardeners a favour by picking and eating it, too, so knock yourself out. In mid-spring, alexanders, a.k.a 'horse parsley', is known for its succulent stem, flowers and leaf tips and can be taken home and steamed to serve as an edible garnish. And bramble leaves are great for making tea.

You'll need to do your homework, as it's essential that you correctly identify the plants and don't mistake them for anything inedible. Edible wildflowers can be found throughout the year, so make a note of what you can find in each season and where in the country it grows. If you're an urban dweller, check out your nearest wood or green space (not your local park). Depending on what you're looking for, you may have to broaden your area. If you can afford to and have the time, hop on a train or drive further afield.



WHAT YOU NEED FOR WILDFLOWER FOOD FORAGING

1. A cotton or linen bag (a tote is ideal) for transporting your wildflowers without suffocating them. You can also take a lined basket.
2. Ideally, you should invest in an eyeglass to help you properly identify your wildflowers. Some flowers look very similar to others, so it's vital that you correctly identify them. You'll need to check the characteristics of your edible plant are exactly right to make sure you know which plants are edible and which must be avoided in case they're dangerous to consume. You can buy inexpensive eyeglasses, but if you haven't got the budget and if you're in any doubt about a plant, then just don't pick it.
3. Hardy work or gardening gloves (easily found in hardware shops or online) are a good idea, to protect your hands as you forage. Your skin may be sensitive and you could be allergic to some wildflowers.
4. A pair of pruners or secateurs for careful cutting of your wildflowers.
5. Sensible clothes. If you're immersing yourself in wildflowers, don't wear shorts – nettle rash is not much fun...



THE SEA, THE SEA!

It's no secret that spending time by the water has a marked effect on how we feel. As with stargazing (see pages 130-131), psychological studies show that an expanse of water such as a river or the sea reminds us that we are part of a vast, natural world. Focusing on our connection to this world, rather than our individual anxieties and concerns, helps to give us perspective. We remember that what matters is good health, good relationships and community living. This doesn't mean that our worries are insignificant or should be dismissed, but their burden can be alleviated somewhat when we open our eyes to the bigger picture.

It isn't just the sight of water that soothes us and brings us back into the moment; it's the sounds and smells, the wildlife that flocks to it, too. The Victorians often sent those recuperating from illness to the sea to complete their recovery. It's easy to see why time spent near water helps maintain and restore good mental and physical health. We arrive home tired, but in the best possible way – our bodies and minds grateful for this valuable time away from hectic modern life.

If you live in a city, you can still benefit from water therapy.

If you are able to, hop on a train for a day trip to the seaside, or head to a lake or river. If not, many city parks also have great ponds and lakes. Technology can also be your friend – download an app and listen to the sounds of water. This can be particularly useful when you're experiencing a hectic time at work or in your personal life. Spend half an hour with your headphones on, and your blood-pressure will lower, your mind and body will feel calmer, and you'll feel stronger and better able to cope with stress. Trials showed that levels of stress and loneliness decreased in the elderly when they were shown videos of seas and oceans, so finding a 'sea fix' on YouTube can be hugely therapeutic, too.



HOW TO PREPARE FOR YOUR 'WATER THERAPY'

1. Consult a reliable weather app ahead of your trip, to make sure that your experience won't include a howling gale, torrential rain, a spring hail storm, or a snow shower. That said, a bit of a breeze and some light rain can add to the exhilaration of the experience.
2. Dress for the weather. Take a light rucksack and pack a waterproof jacket, some gloves and a spare pair of socks. Depending on where you're headed, take wellies or hiking boots in case you encounter mud. Layers are a good idea; in spring, the temperature can switch from mild to chilly within a few hours, and if you're next to the sea, it will be cooler than in the city.
3. If you're going to the coast, you'll probably be able to buy snacks there, but if you're heading somewhere more remote (a mountain lake, for example), you'll need to pack some energy-giving food. Always take water with you, and check out the area's amenities beforehand so you can plan for a refill.
4. Educate yourself about the conditions in your chosen destination: find out if there are strong currents or swampy land. If you're going to the sea and you're not a strong swimmer, keep away from any areas of water marked as dangerous. If you're determined to get on or in the water, then this is particularly important – there is no shame in a life-jacket, even if you're planning a simple pedalo on a park pond.



CYCLE AWAY THE COBWEBS

By now, we know that regular exercise is not only good for our bodies, helping to reduce the likelihood of illness and disease and prevent obesity, it is good for our mental health, too. Those glorious endorphins that are released after half an hour of moderate cardio-vascular exercise significantly reduce our levels of stress and anxiety. Exercise also sharpens our brains, improving our memory and creative thinking. Then there's the rush of having challenged yourself a little physically, pushing yourself out of your comfort zone and lethargy to feel more energised. It's fun, too! Participating in team exercise, even with just one or two other people, is motivational, producing a sense of responsibility and shared experience. We're more likely to follow through with group exercise plans even when we don't feel like it – we don't want to let people down. Afterwards, we feel more bonded to others, more part of a community and ultimately fitter and more physically confident.

Committing to an expensive gym membership can be an effective way for some people to motivate themselves, but exercising outside is widely believed to be the healthiest choice as it boosts vitamin D levels and gives you the opportunity to breathe clean, fresh air. Outdoor exercise is often cheaper, too; running and wild swimming are free, as is cycling, once you've invested in a good bike. Cycling can even save you money; it can be a great alternative to public transport. Recent studies have shown that people who cycle every day experience more prolonged daily contentment compared to those who don't. Although pretty much all exercise is good, a bike is low-impact as it's easier on our joints, bones and hearts. If you're already a super cyclist then you're all set, but if the experience is new to you, here are some key tips to get you started.



1. Choose a bike that's right for your level of experience. For beginners, lightweight bikes with thinner tyres are best for road riding.
2. Get the right size bike. To test this, straddle the top tube of the bike and aim for about an inch gap between your body and the frame. If you're not sure, ask advice from bike-shop experts.
3. Consider your budget and your cycling ambitions. Will you only be using your bike for gentle rides at weekends? Is it for more strenuous exercise? Are you planning to build up to a long-distance ride? Will the terrain you ride on be smooth or hilly? Again, talk to an expert who can advise you on the right model for you, taking into account your gender, your build and your level of fitness. There are lots of different types of bikes, so take your time to choose the one that's right for you.
4. Don't forget your helmet! This is particularly important for urban cycling, but you should wear one in remote, rural areas, too.
5. Use your bike in a way that feels comfortable and realistic for you. As with every activity in this book, cycling should be fun, rewarding and stress-reducing, not stress-inducing!



CHASE THE BIRD CHORUS

We've been exposed to birdsong all our lives, but many of us haven't taken the time to properly listen to it, or to learn why birds sing and what each individual song can tell us about their habits and needs. Birdsong isn't just wonderful to hear, there's a purpose to it. It's a vital form of communication between the bird community.

Take the male warbler, which sets off from Africa for England at the start of spring, flying over 2000 miles with romance on his mind. The warbler's colouring means he blends in too well with the landscape, but he needs to stand out to attract a female, so uses his seductive voice to make himself known and get the girl. Birdsong is not just for wooing, though. It's vital in staking out territory; the bird equivalent of flexing muscles and warning other male birds off its patch.

Although all birds 'sing', only certain species are technically songbirds, meaning they practice and perfect their songs. Starlings and goldfinches, for example, love a good old sing-along together. The sounds of other birds are innate from birth and often designed for a primal purpose – like the male and female robin, who sing throughout the winter expressly to defend their territory.

Learning to identify birdsong is a hugely rewarding activity. It can help us to develop patience and learn to be silent. It can also help us to feel more connected to these extraordinary creatures and with nature in general. We are humbled by the ingenuity of wildlife, learning to stop and look outwards at the world around us for a while – a significant marker of good mental health.

BIRDSONG TIPS

1. Start with the songbirds, which in northern Europe include chaffinches, blackbirds, robins and skylarks. Each of these birds has a distinct sound, or 'tune' – songbirds make the most melodic sounds.
2. Visit a variety of locations to expose yourself to a variety of birdsong. If you're by a river or lake, here is where you'll see and hear the kingfisher or the wagtail. If you follow the sound you might even catch the vivid blue of the kingfisher's livery. If you're in a rural area with plenty of fields, then you're likely to hear the rise and fall of the skylark's call.
3. It might sound daft, but a good way of remembering individual birdsong is to apply your own words or lyrics to each – try it with the wood pigeon's four-note warble.
4. Handily, certain birds are named after their songs – the cuckoo ('cuck-oo') for instance, or the 'chiff-chaff' of the chiffchaff. Keep this in mind as you listen and it might help you identify some of the birds.
5. Birds are incredibly clever, so be aware that sometimes they mimick each other's songs. As you build on your knowledge, you'll learn to identify the fakes.
6. Believe it or not, birds have different accents depending on which country they're in, so wherever you are in the world, make sure you listen out for local sounds.

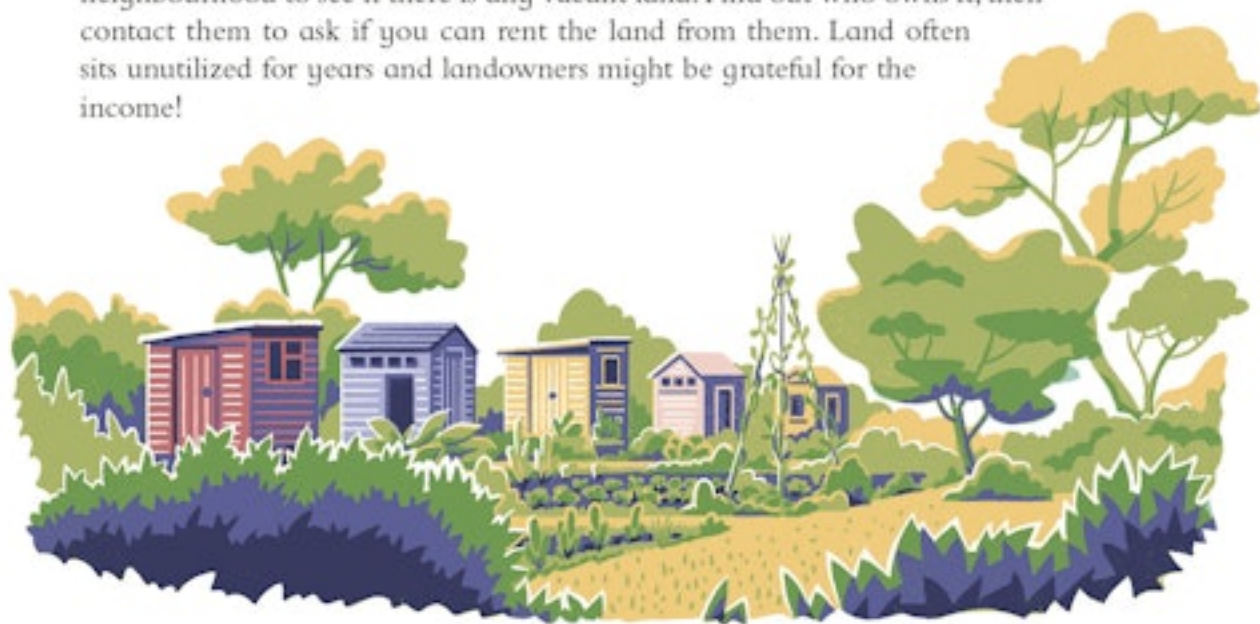


GET INVOLVED IN ALLOTMENTS

Many people consider allotment management to be a quaint, old-fashioned hobby. The fact is, renting allotment space is more popular than ever, and not just for the older generation. Those with stressful jobs, who might spend up to 12 hours a day staring at a computer screen, may find blissful release in digging their hands into soil, nurturing plants and seeds to fruition. For those of us without our own garden, connecting with nature through an allotment reaps many benefits. The simplicity of this endeavour – working in the fresh air to cultivate new life and watch nature do its thing – works wonders in decreasing our stress levels. It increases our serotonin levels, and ultimately improves our cognitive mental health, including our memory. And it's never too soon to start your allotment life...

Allotments are available globally. They are mostly state-owned, so the public can obtain space by applying to their local council or municipality. In the UK, that means contacting either your local parish or district council, or the National Trust, who also have spaces. They can provide you with a list of local sites, then you can add your name to the list of applicants. This can take time, as allotments are popular and waiting lists can be long, but using your newfound powers of patience, sit tight until your name comes up. You can also join forces with a group of five or six like-minded people, which will promote your application.

If the wait becomes too frustrating, it's always worth scouting out your local neighbourhood to see if there is any vacant land. Find out who owns it, then contact them to ask if you can rent the land from them. Land often sits unutilized for years and landowners might be grateful for the income!



AWESOME AWE WALKS

No, this is not just a term for a really good stomp through the park or countryside. An 'awe walk' is all about harnessing our awe of the natural world – its colours, sights and sounds – which in turn causes us to shift our mental focus outwards rather than inwards, thus lowering stress, anxiety and blood pressure. The awe walk movement has been around since the early noughties, and is more vital than ever for keeping our minds and bodies healthy.

The key is to seek out a wide, open space that's also brand new to you – a mountain with a panoramic view, for instance, or the top of a skyscraper or tall building (where permissible) in urban areas. The feeling of awe will come more naturally when it's inspired by sights and sounds that are unfamiliar to you, and it takes only a 15-minute walk to feel the benefits.

TIPS TO ACHIEVE ULTIMATE AWE

1. Turn off your devices, or leave them at home.
2. Before you set off, sit quietly or meditate to get yourself into a receptive state of mind. Avoid activity that stresses you and embrace behaviour that soothes you.
3. Turn to pages 12-13 for some tips on how to focus on your physical connection with the ground. Use this technique as you walk.
4. As you move, notice those moments that bring you awe and make your hairs stand on end: a sudden glimpse of wildlife such as a baby rabbit frolicking, or a squirrel making its mad dash up a tree, or the colour of the grass and how the ground feels beneath your feet: the beauty of nature's architecture. You'll feel your body respond to your sense of wonder, and it's the best feeling in the world.



HULA HULA!

Remember when you spent hours hula hooping as a child? Never-ending fun, right? And when you managed to get your hoop spinning around your waist for a whole minute without it dropping to the ground – how great was that?

You may have thought your hula-hooping days were over, but the good news is they're back! Not only is this activity excellent for fitness and toning, it's great for your mental health, too.

Hooping gets your heart rate up, burns calories, improves balance and coordination and harnesses the power of core mental-health stabilisers – mindfulness and meditation – which are known to reduce stress and combat depression. Hooping athletes know they are practising a mind-body-spirit sport that compels them to stay in the moment, with their focus only on keeping the hoop spinning – they call it a mindful, movement meditation. Best of all, hooping is fun, and is a worthwhile activity, even if the hoop ends up on the ground more often than not. You don't need to be good at hula hooping, just practising it is enough to reap its many benefits.



WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE HOOPING

1. As with all exercise, if you have any underlying health conditions, including problems with your heart, breathing, back or hips, it's best to check with your doctor or a physiotherapist before you embark on hooping.
2. Although hooping can be done inside if you've got enough space and are unable to leave your house, it's best done outdoors in your garden, local park or even a deserted tennis court.
3. There are different kinds of hoops, so do some research before you buy, and make sure that your hoop stretches from the tips of your toes to around your belly button when you're standing.
4. It's a good idea to check out online video tutorials first, to be sure of the technique you'll need to use as a beginner. Online videos are also a great way to check out the kind of super-hooping you can progress to.
5. It's best to wear comfortable, flexible clothing while hooping. Leggings or sweatpants are ideal, along with a T-shirt, trainers or plimsols. If you're hooping outside, make sure you wear warmer clothing, but remember that you'll heat up as you hoop. An easily removable hoodie or sweatshirt is a good idea.
6. Now prepare your playlist, plug in your headphones and you're good to go!



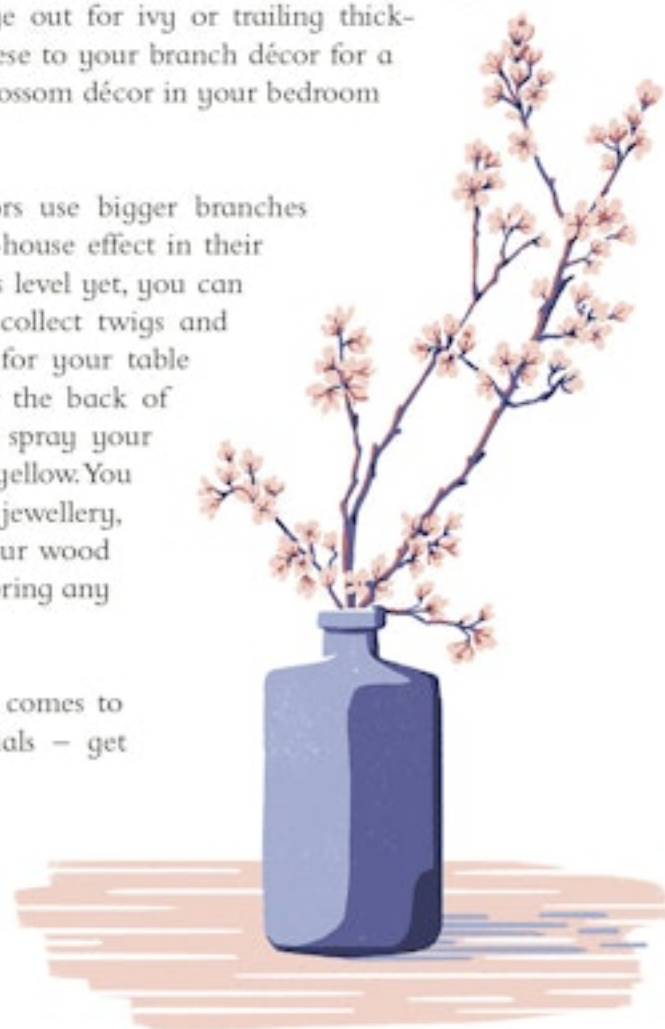
SPRING BRANCH DÉCOR

The simplest way to spruce up your home for spring is to use outdoor finds to decorate rooms, fireplaces, mantelpieces and doorways, and to make natural table decorations. It isn't just about the sight of spring twigs, branches, buds and leaves around you, the smell of nature will also reinvigorate your home and awaken your senses.

All you'll need is a bag or sack big enough to store your foraged finds, a pair of wellies in case you encounter any mud, and a pair of work gloves (you'll find these in hardware stores or any big supermarket). Head for your nearest patch of dense trees, and you'll find lots of fallen branches and twigs. Remember, don't break anything directly off the trees: only use materials that have already fallen. You can also keep an eye out for ivy or trailing thick-stemmed plants; you can add these to your branch décor for a snap of colour. A bit of cherry blossom décor in your bedroom will bring immediate joy.

Some hardcore spring decorators use bigger branches as curtain poles, creating a tree-house effect in their homes. If you're not quite at this level yet, you can just add a few simple touches: collect twigs and place them together in a vase for your table or mantelpiece or trail ivy over the back of a chest of drawers. For variety, spray your branches silver or a pale blue or yellow. You could make a twig nest for your jewellery, too. Make sure you clean all your wood before using it so that you don't bring any creatures inside.

There are endless ideas when it comes to decorating with natural materials – get online to find more inspiration.



SPRING PHOTOSHOOT

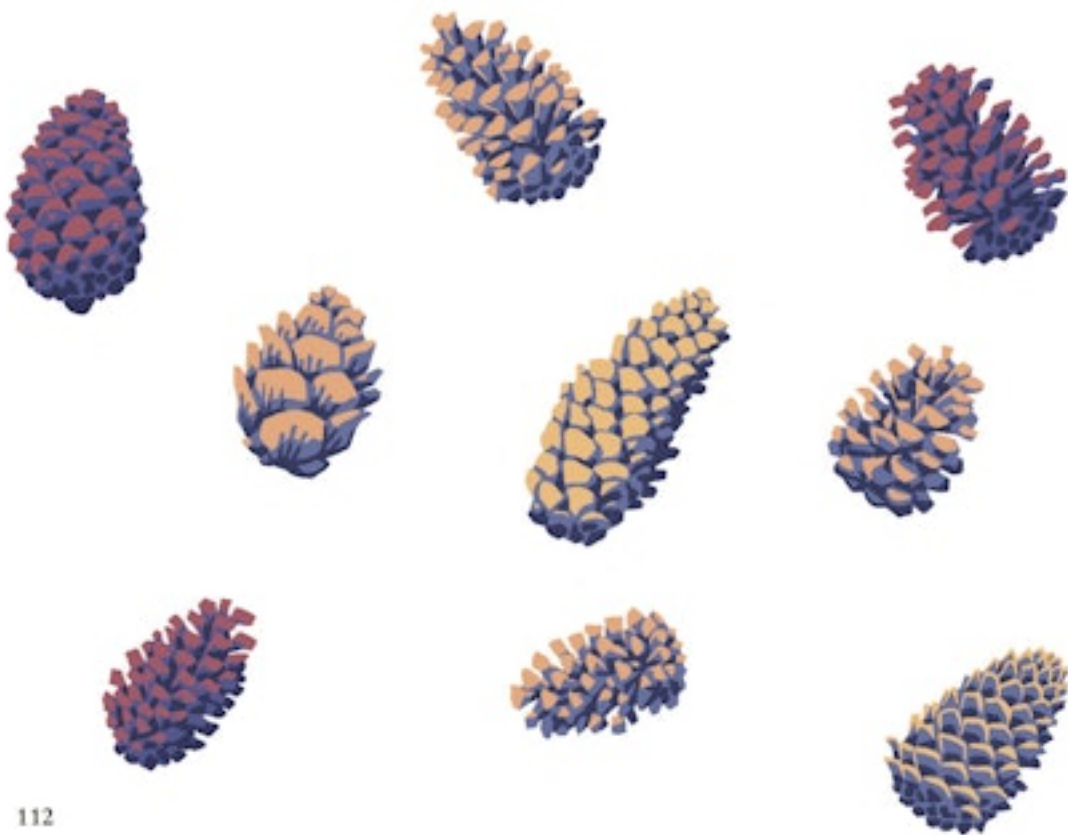
Keep a written journal of your outdoor spring experience, and take photos to illustrate it. Begin with your emergence from winter, noting the feelings and thoughts you have during the transition, and chart how your moods change as you explore nature. You could even set up a Facebook or Instagram account devoted to your spring diary, so others can share your experience. If you started the season a little fatigued or low in mood, record this and accompany it with a visual – the view out of your window, perhaps, as a first step to spring healing. You can keep your journal private and just for yourself, but studies show that by expressing your feelings and sharing them with others, along with any activities you've found to lift your mood and improve your mental health, you're engaging with those who empathise and identify with you. This combats loneliness – yours and other people's – and is inspiring and motivational. Remember that it's OK to not be OK. Later, when your mood is up and your anxiety is reduced, you'll be cheered on by a community of like-minded humans.



PINE CONE BOWLING

Pine cones are one of autumn's most recognisable symbols. Around September, we start to see them scattered underneath conifer trees in our parks, forests and gardens. Before they drop, the cones are important as protective cases for pine seeds; their rounded scales keep the seeds safe from predators looking for a snack, ensuring new tree growth for the future. Pine cones are so pleasing to look at and so beautifully designed, it's almost as though they have been carved by hand, but they're just one more example of nature's extraordinary capacity for great design. Feeling the texture and shape of a pine cone can calm and distress us, even if we are not aware of it. Pine cones are functional, sensory and ornamental and they make delightful natural bowling pins or boules balls.

You'll need to set out for a good pine cone forage: try and gather at least 12 of similar size and shape. You can even spray paint the cones to distinguish them for each player. Then, armed with your boules or bowling rules, spend some time in your nearest green space enjoying a restful game. Pine cone bowling has been popular as a game for children for a long time, but it's a marvellous way of connecting with nature at any age.



CREATE AN AUTUMN MOOD JOURNAL



As you journey through autumn, a great way of measuring its effect on your mental wellbeing is to keep a mood journal. Don't be surprised if your moods fluctuate regularly. We all have good days and bad days, but you may well discover that the weather, the temperature, your level of activity and how much time you have spent outdoors embracing nature can have a significant impact on how energetic, positive or stable your feelings are. Colour is important, too. When the days are overcast and dark, colour fades and often our mood fades along with it. Noticing how a cloudy, grey sky might make us lethargic, restless or generally low is a positive action, reminding us that these feelings are almost always temporary, as well as how much the natural world influences us. We are intimately connected with our surroundings, and the highs and lows we experience are all part of nature's process. Feeling this bond through the light and shade of our emotions strengthens and stabilises us, decreasing anxiety and feelings of foreboding.

You can keep a mood journal in a simple notebook, recording your feelings daily or weekly. You could also incorporate your journal in your Instagram feed, combining a visual record of the colours and sights outdoors with a mood caption. If you choose the latter, you'll inspire others, too.



PING PONG

Table tennis, or ping pong, is easy to learn and has an abundance of mental agility and health benefits. It can be played all year round, but a game outside on a crisp, autumn day warms you up and boosts energy levels. It's guaranteed to have you laughing, even if your will to win doesn't kick in.

Studies suggest that ping pong improves memory function and capacity to concentrate for all ages, improving our cognitive ability and motor learning (our ability to develop skills through practice). Some scientists believe the quick, rapid movement required is a contributing factor. Like tennis and chess, ping pong is a strategic game; players literally think on their feet, having to make decisions quickly. It's also a social game, during which there is little or no room for anxious thoughts because we are compelled to stay in each second and not project our minds any further forward than our next move.

If you have a big enough garden or outside space, this will be an ideal place to set up your table. All the necessary equipment can be bought fairly inexpensively, but many urban parks have permanent ping pong tables; all you'll need is paddles and balls. You can also improvise with an old kitchen table and a net.

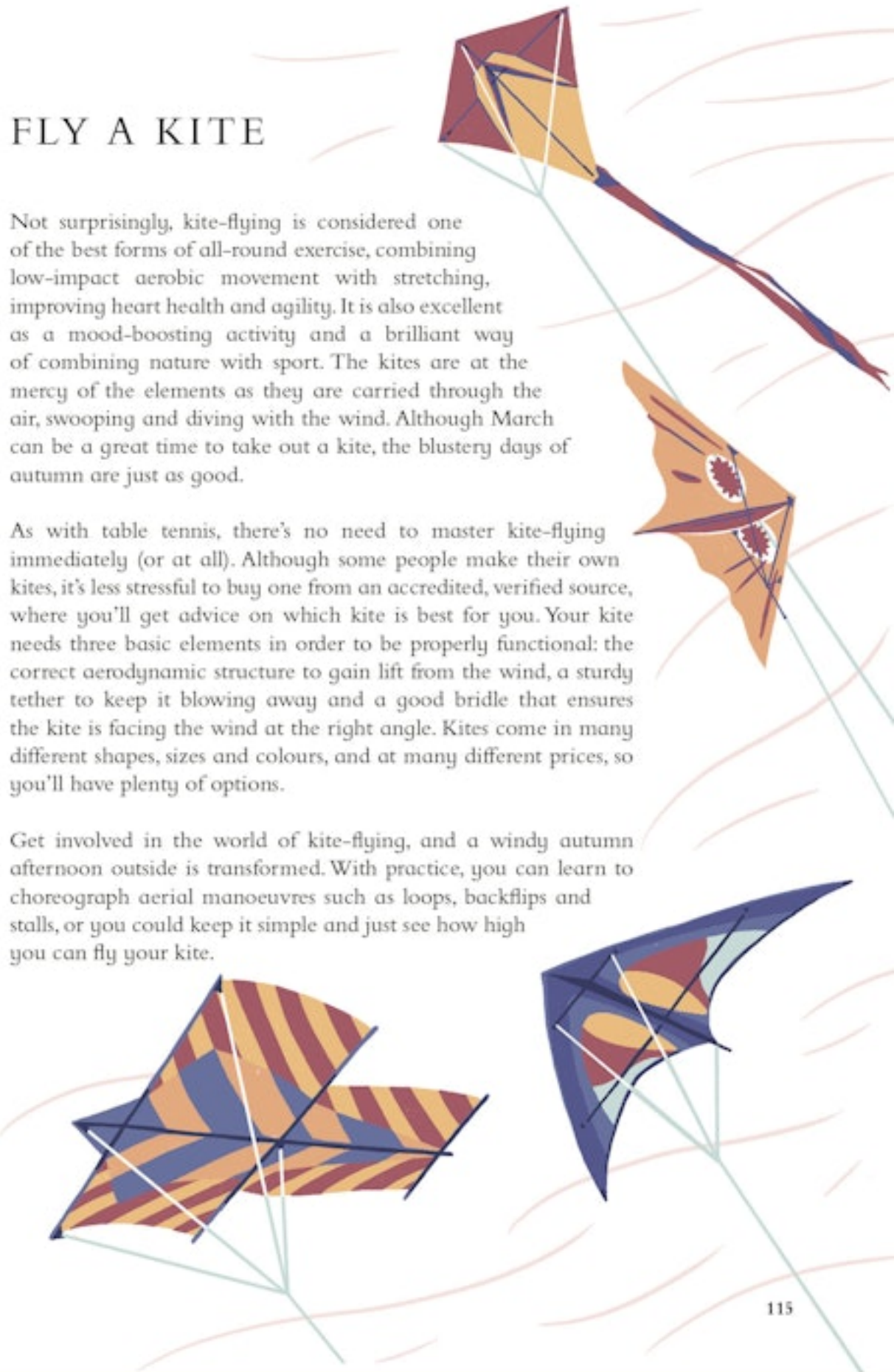


FLY A KITE

Not surprisingly, kite-flying is considered one of the best forms of all-round exercise, combining low-impact aerobic movement with stretching, improving heart health and agility. It is also excellent as a mood-boosting activity and a brilliant way of combining nature with sport. The kites are at the mercy of the elements as they are carried through the air, swooping and diving with the wind. Although March can be a great time to take out a kite, the blustery days of autumn are just as good.

As with table tennis, there's no need to master kite-flying immediately (or at all). Although some people make their own kites, it's less stressful to buy one from an accredited, verified source, where you'll get advice on which kite is best for you. Your kite needs three basic elements in order to be properly functional: the correct aerodynamic structure to gain lift from the wind, a sturdy tether to keep it blowing away and a good bridle that ensures the kite is facing the wind at the right angle. Kites come in many different shapes, sizes and colours, and at many different prices, so you'll have plenty of options.

Get involved in the world of kite-flying, and a windy autumn afternoon outside is transformed. With practice, you can learn to choreograph aerial manoeuvres such as loops, backflips and stalls, or you could keep it simple and just see how high you can fly your kite.



FORAGE FOR AUTUMN DÉCOR



So many wonderful plants, flowers and berries can be found in the autumn: rich reds and greens among the golden-brown leaves and the fallen branches that scatter over the ground. This is a season that lends itself very well to creating home décor and you can craft a vivid natural environment inside your home when the temperatures dip outside. Bits of kindling, thin branches and autumn leaves all make wonderful decoration above fireplaces, or on shelves or tables.



When you set out for a walk to a park or wood, take a pair of secateurs with you ready to take cuttings. Keep your eyes peeled for 'old man's beard', also known as *Clematis vitalba*, which can be found early on in the season in mid to late September.

Its flowering seeds present as long, silky tufts of hair, which you can adapt for your home by removing the seeds and using hairspray to help those glorious beards last. Then there are gorgeous rose hips

– keep an eye out for round, pumpkin-shaped *Rosa rugosa* hips and star-shaped clusters of this flower. These need to be stored in a dark, dry area to keep the hips from shrivelling, as does hawthorn, once it has been cut into lengths and had its leaves removed. Spindle berries, with their pinkish-red foliage and bright orange seeds, are also a



great find, as are hydrangeas, certain grasses and, later in the season, dogwood, eucalyptus, yew and fir. And we mustn't forget about those traditional autumn-winter favourites, holly and mistletoe.



PRESERVING BERRIES AND FLOWERS

Household glycerine is excellent for keeping the colour and softer texture of flowers and berries alive for longer in your home, as it prevents them from drying out. You can buy glycerine from any chemist. Here's how to preserve berries and flowers.

1. First, leave the stems of your plants in water for around eight hours, to hydrate them.
2. Cut a little off your stems and carefully crush the ends with your fingers.
3. Now fill a glass jar (a jam jar is perfect) with about a centimetre of glycerine and a couple of centimetres of hot water (filtered if possible).
4. Leave your stems in this glycerine-water mix for as long as it takes for the liquid to absorb into your stems. This can take around two weeks.
5. Position your newly-revived cuttings as table centrepieces, mantelpiece features or bedroom or windowsill decoration.

For more information on what plant life to look for in autumn, visit trusted online resources, such as The Woodland Trust.



PUMPKIN PICKING

Another vivid symbol of autumn, the pumpkin has its moment in the spotlight from mid to late October – though pumpkins can be picked for seven or eight weeks and they are much more than Halloween motifs.



If you have the space, you can grow your own pumpkins. They're pretty low maintenance and are best started off from seeds indoors around April, then moved outside to catch the sun in summer, before being harvested in the autumn. But there's also a lot to be said for pumpkin picking at local farms in both urban and rural areas, and many city farms have pumpkin patches. So, make a note in your diary to visit a nearby patch around mid to late October. You'll probably need to book as demand is high. And remember, pumpkins are heavy, so you'll need to consider how you'll transport them back home.



PUMPKIN POWER



Carving pumpkins to make Halloween lanterns is always fun. You'll need the right utensils: a large, sturdy, serrated kitchen knife for major carving, along with a paring knife for more delicate craftsmanship, and an ice-cream scoop for gouging out the flesh (you can keep the flesh to cook with later). You might want to paint your pumpkins, so use acrylic or spray paint, which won't crack on the pumpkin's skin. And they'll look amazing with an LED tealight positioned inside.

SPICED PUMPKIN BUTTER

Delicious spread on toast, crumpets and pancakes, this is a healthy autumnal treat. You'll need:

- Around 850 g (2 x 425 g tins) of pumpkin puree (or make your own by peeling and seeding the fruit, cutting into cubes, then steaming for 10 to 15 minutes until soft)
- 120 ml of apple juice
- 2 tsp of ground ginger
- 1 tsp of ground cinnamon
- 250 ml of maple syrup
- a small nutmeg for grating
- 2 tsp of vanilla paste



COOKING

1. Combine all your ingredients in a pan, add a pinch of salt, then put the pan on a medium heat and bring to the boil.
2. Now reduce the heat to simmer for between 20 to 30 minutes, stirring regularly.
3. You'll know your butter is cooked when it's thickened and is a lovely golden-brown colour.
4. Empty your cooked mixture into a bowl and leave to cool completely, then scoop into clean containers (glass jars are best) and keep in the fridge for up to a week.

VISIT A HISTORIC HOUSE AND GROUNDS

Taking a day trip to a historic house or stately home is a wonderful experience – a visual and sensory history lesson with a touch of old-fashioned glamour. In the UK, you can walk in the footsteps of aristocracy, exploring opulent buildings and enjoying beautiful landscaped gardens and expansive estates. Some of these heritage homes are embedded in acres of countryside. Others, such as London's Kenwood House, or the beautiful Eltham Palace, are in cities. These and many other architectural portals to the past are found all around the UK and in Europe, each of them uniquely enchanting, with its own historical attractions.

Historic houses and their grounds are open to the public most of the year, but check whether you need to book in advance before you go. You usually have to pay an entrance fee or make a donation. You may want to check what the weather conditions are like for the day of your visit, though even when it's cold and rainy, a wander through beautiful grounds can be magical.



ESCAPE TO A NATIONAL PARK



The creation of Britain's national parks was at least partly inspired by the country's early 19th-century poets, Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth. They were all passionate about the beauty of the natural world, influencing the public to demand greater access to it. Thanks to them, there are now over a dozen of these carefully maintained natural breathing spaces in the UK, providing acres of lovingly treated land for all kinds of plants and wildlife. Between them, these parks have paid host to hundreds of conservation projects, where nature is protected and people can improve their wellbeing.



For a breathtaking natural experience, there's little to beat a national park. Combining stunning landscapes and wildlife with geographical heritage, your park visit will be unique and unforgettable. From scenic waterways and mudflats to ancient trees, grazing wildlife, mountains and lakes, you'll find a perfect nature experience wherever you are in the country. Respect for nature is vital, so make sure you research what you'll need before you go, any rules and regulations, opening times and entrance fees, then prepare for a spectacular experience.



COMMUNITY CARING OUTSIDE

While you're strengthening your own mental wellbeing with more time spent out in nature, consider helping more vulnerable members of the community do the same. Depending on how fragile or buoyant you're feeling, you may not feel able to look after others as well as yourself, and that is perfectly OK. But if you feel up to it, the benefits to those you're helping, as well as the emotional reward you'll receive for your efforts, are considerable. For the elderly living on their own, some company, a chat and an adventure outdoors can be a lifeline. Studies have shown that fresh air, regular exercise and mentally stimulating activities really boost the elderly's quality of life and help combat the loneliness that arises when they are separated from their loved ones. And the experience isn't one-way, either; there's a lot to learn from older generations. Spend some time listening to their stories and you'll gain a new perspective, and perhaps a new friend. The start of autumn can be an unsettling time for the vulnerable, as it limits their options, so it's an ideal time for this activity.



HOW TO HELP

- If you know any lonely elderly people living locally to you and who still have independence, along with making an effort to telephone or visit them weekly for a catch-up, take them out for a walk! Helping a lonely or immobile person take a stroll outside can help combat loneliness as well as providing the usual benefits of time spent in nature.
- Depending on their physical capabilities, you could encourage your new friend(s) to help you garden. They may well have a thing or two to teach you about horticulture!
- Engage in a little light outdoor ping pong, and make sure to build in rests, during which you could play a board game to pass the time.
- Most importantly of all, listen to what their interests are and choose activities accordingly.
- You can also volunteer for organisations that support older people – there are lots of established ones. They can instigate befriending programmes for the more isolate elderly, and welcome 'active buddies' who can have one-to-one contact with them, accompanying them outside for walks, or driving them to the seaside for an afternoon.
- When you are out and about, be kind. Let the elderly or more vulnerable members of society know they are seen. Smile, wave, even stop and chat if it feels appropriate. It could be the difference between a good day and bad day for both of you.



BECOME A RAMBLER



If you're sociable and thrive on being active while getting to know new people, rambling could be the perfect outdoor activity for you. Ramblers come in all shapes, sizes and ages, and the popularity of this group pursuit is increasing. Many people find that a Saturday or Sunday spent heading out to beautiful countryside to embark on a few hours walking, stopping off for refreshments along the way, is a wonderful antidote to stressful weekly lives and preferable to socialising in pubs and restaurants. You'll end your ramble feeling both invigorated and tired, in the best possible way. You'll sleep better, feel calmer and enjoy the buzz of being part of a team. You do generally have to be over 18, and be responsible about your own state of health. If you have any underlying health conditions, you must first ask a medical expert if rambling is suitable for you.

Once you decide to go for it, contact the various rambling organisations to find out how you enrol, what sorts of routes are available and which are best for you and what you need to wear and bring with you. You'll see some spectacular natural sights in all weathers, and the wider perspective you'll gain on our world and its idiosyncratic beauty is priceless.



JOIN IN WITH A PARK WALK

Park walks are a wonderful activity for the elderly, stimulating good physical health and providing fresh air and companionship. All different levels of physical fitness are accommodated, too. But you don't need to be a senior citizen to get involved in a park walk. For younger folk, a hearty walk around their local park with like-minded people can be an excellent alternative to running or jogging, which is tougher on our joints and muscles and more likely to cause injuries. Also, some people just don't like running (fair enough!) and prefer the lower impact, sociable nature of a good brisk walk. Any exercise done in slightly cooler weather is more comfortable as you'll heat up as you go, so this is an activity for spring/early summer or autumn, or the less harsh periods of winter. If this sounds appealing, here's how to prepare:

- If you're thinking this will be a regular activity, you'll need to invest in some strong, comfortable and durable footwear. Something between a trainer and a mountain-hiking boot is about right, but we're all different so consult with experts online or in specialist shops.
- Wear cotton layers on top to keep you warm and to allow ventilation, and comfortable joggers or leggings. For outerwear, choose lightweight, rainproof jackets that won't weigh you down but will keep the rain off and the wind out.
- Be realistic about your walking speed. Though walking briskly is good for our cardiac health, any walking is good. A park walk is about more than fitness – it's about companionship and engagement with nature.



PREPARING FOR DARKER MONTHS



We've talked about how the changing seasons affect us – how low in energy and anxious we can feel during the transition. As autumn draws to a close and the bright, hot summer seems light years away, it is typically more of a challenge for us to sustain mental wellbeing as we cross over into the darkest, coldest months of the year. If we were squirrels, we would be foraging for food to tuck away to last us through the harsh winter period; these innovative creatures, like many animals (and plantlife), instinctively know how to move through one season to another. And though the needs of the animal kingdom are based on basic survival, we could learn a thing or two from their habits. Now is the time to employ some useful techniques and practise self-care.

If you have been keeping a visual or written journal on each season and its effects on your wellbeing, make a note to continue this going forward. As December approaches, make sure you capture as many of nature's changes as you can. The world changes quickly at this time of year, and if you concentrate on wonder and fascination, rather than mourning the loss of the summer, it can help you to see this period in a more positive light. It can serve as a reminder of the transience of all living things, which are in perpetual motion, moving forward – because that's the only direction there is. Once you embrace this natural way of being, and remind yourself that all our emotions are important and shouldn't be feared, you will move into the new season with strength.



WAYS TO PREPARE FOR CHANGE

1. Think practically and make sure all your domestic needs are catered to for the winter. Fix any insulation issues with your home and ensure you have enough warm clothes to see you through the season.
2. Stock up on food rich in vitamins and minerals, which will help keep you healthy during the winter. Carrots contain vitamin C, an important antioxidant that helps your body produce collagen. Beetroot helps your body eliminate toxins. Spinach, kale and cabbage all contain vitamin K, which is excellent for skin maintenance, and broccoli is packed full of vitamins and minerals and antioxidants, too.
3. Be good to your body – take the time to exfoliate, practice circulation-boosting exercises such as a brisk walk or a run and focus on core strengthening exercises like pilates and yoga.
4. Get plenty of sleep. Early dinners, early nights and early mornings are wonderful for maintaining energy.
5. Make plans with your friends for the months ahead. Isolation is a key factor in depression and anxiety, and having social events to look forward to keeps you feeling part of your community.





WINTER

STARGAZING

We know how beautiful a clear night sky is when it's dotted with stars, whether it's a perfect, late summer evening, or a crisp winter's night. Some studies have shown that stargazing is not only good for your mental and emotional wellbeing, bringing calm after the stresses of everyday life, it can actually make us nicer people! Whether you have a hectic job that leaves you a little drained at the end of each day, or you've spent the day cooking, cleaning or caring for children, taking the time to sit outside after dark on a cloudless night and look up at nature's spectacular night-time canopy brings instant perspective.

The sky is a kind of doorway to infinite Space and, contemplating this, we start to feel humbled. Each of us is important individually, of course, but we are also all part of a vast universe. Remembering this, as we turn our faces up to the sky, reminds us that we are part of the collective human race, each of us bringing something unique to life on Earth. For a brief time, we can let go of the need to control what happens in our lives. Stargazing encourages acceptance and a community spirit – it quite literally helps us see the bigger picture.

Another great reason to stargaze is to encourage our creativity. Our creative brain is triggered when we allow ourselves the mental space to let our ideas come. During the day, as we go about our everyday tasks and responsibilities, our minds are whirring with thoughts and anxiety, and the pressure of this leaves very little space in our brains for anything else. There is simply no time to be creative! Stopping and allowing our thoughts to slow down encourages our imagination to unfold...

TOP TIPS FOR STARGAZING

1. First, do some research online. Find out what stars you can view and the best time to view them. There are also impressive astro apps available that you can download to your phone. They can map your location and guide you through your stargazing experience.
2. Stargazing is best done when the sky is cold, clear and crisp, not humid, so you'll need to wrap up warm and perhaps take a hot drink with you. Ideally, choose a night when there's a new moon or a crescent moon; a full moon will produce too much light and diminish the appearance of the surrounding stars.
3. If you're a city dweller, find a spot high up, so that buildings and unnatural light don't impede your view of the sky. If it's really dark and you need to take a torch, a torch with a red filter is better for your eyes and optimal vision. If you're using your phone as your torch, make your own red filter by covering your phone with translucent red paper.
4. You don't need fancy equipment to get to know the night sky. Start by learning to identify planets, stars and constellations with just the naked eye. For the more advanced stargazer, a telescope and binoculars will magnify your view and heighten the experience, but neither are necessary when it comes to your enjoyment and sense of connection with the celestial bodies surrounding Planet Earth.



MAKE A HOLIDAY WREATH

Kicking this dramatic season off by creating a wonderful winter wreath is a great way of channelling our creativity. It's also a great excuse to get outside and hunt for natural materials. Having a goal that encourages us to venture outside helps us adapt to and embrace the winter environment, and see the beauty in nature's cycle. The origins of the wreath date back to Ancient Roman, Egyptian and Greek times – for these civilisations, it was a symbol of victory, power and everlasting life. Traditionally, wreaths are made from evergreens: holly, ivy, yew, eucalyptus and pine foliage. These plants are resilient and enduring, and represent eternal life and stamina. Keep this symbolism in mind as an affirmation of your own resilience and strength.

Decide whether your wreath will be an outdoor or indoor one. Outdoor wreaths usually last five to six weeks and those hung indoors last around two weeks, so timing your forage is important. Although evergreen foliage and berries make for a greener wreath, you can also use dogwood, willow, hazel or birch for a more rustic look. Make sure you gather plenty of foliage – more than you think you'll need – and look out for holly, cotoneaster or ivy berries to add colour.



WHAT YOU'LL NEED FOR YOUR WREATH

This guide is for a simple eucalyptus wreath, which dries out well and smells wonderful. For more wreath ideas, consult a crafts website or an online video tutorial. You'll need:

- Secateurs for cutting your leaves and berries
- A copper ring or gardening wire of at least 10 inches or a wooden embroidery hoop
- Craft wire or florist's wire
- Scissors
- Conifer twigs
- Mixed eucalyptus (you can use dried, but fresh is better for more flexible stems), and berries (see page 117 for berries preserved in glycerine, which will last longer)



CREATION

1. Starting on the left, lay your conifer twigs face up around your ring, covering about two thirds of the ring itself.
2. Now cut small pieces of wire and use them to carefully attach the conifers to your ring.
3. Lay your eucalyptus stems over your conifers, cut to a length of around twelve inches. Attach them with wire, then add another layer – try and mix up the different kinds of eucalyptus.
4. Now thread in your berries, embedding them in the eucalyptus and using wire again to make sure to attach them to the ring.



You can display your wreath indoors – on a door (if it has a hook), or mount it on a mantelpiece – and bring winter's fresh natural materials inside. You can also hang it from your door knocker so that others can enjoy it outside.

TECH HABITS TO LIFT YOUR MOOD



As we know, technology's enabling of immediate access to information can consume us to the extent that we forget to look around us and live in the moment (without stopping to take an Instagram-worthy photo). We start to feel wired, sleep badly and become slaves to our devices. But technology can also be a force for good, and in the winter months, when we tend to spend more time inside, we can use it to bring a little nature and optimism into our lives. What's more, we can do this without becoming focused on likes and comments.

Changing the wallpaper on your phone is a good place to start. Just switching it to something bright, natural and joyful – perhaps a memory of a wonderful holiday or outdoor adventure – reminds us that we can be transported by the sight of a beach at dusk, a mountain piercing a bright blue sky, a vivid green forest or a tranquil river. Darker days require brighter stimulation, and our visual sense is a hugely powerful rescue remedy. You can then do the same on your computer, and with any screensavers.

Keeping nature and its wonderfully soothing effects in mind, start following social media accounts that celebrate the beautiful outdoors, wildflowers and wildlife, or accounts that champion action against climate change and animal extinction. Be inspired by your tech in ways that don't play into any insecurities or anxiety you might be prone to. By learning more about our natural world, its beauty and any threat to it, and doing whatever we can to keep it thriving, we are reminded that we are each part of a global community and that taking care of the Earth means we are taking care of ourselves.



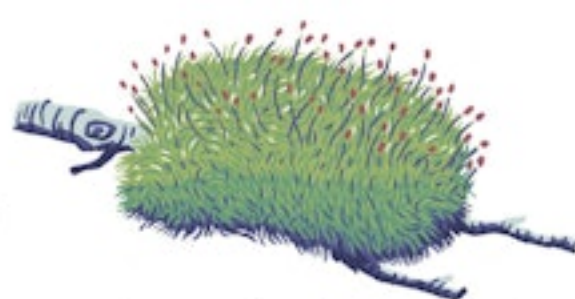
VISIT A DRAMATIC LANDSCAPE

Winter is a dramatic season, as it's a time when the elements can be at their most extreme. Bitter cold, rain, snow and strong blustery winds are often considered problematic. But if we can appreciate nature's theatrics and develop wonder instead of discontent, our nervous systems will calm as we stop fighting with, and start embracing, our environment.

To help you embrace winter, think about visiting a dramatic landscape. There is hardly a country in the world that doesn't offer spectacular, unforgettable terrain. In the UK, dramatic gems include the Lake District, with its snow-capped mountains towering above tranquil stretches of water, where goats graze in surrounding fields, or the clifftops of the very tip of Cornwall at Land's End; here, majestic waves crash against the shore and rise up the craggy cliffs. And Scotland has some of the most beautiful scenery in the world, with its remote isles and cottages, its gorse-strewn hills and mountains, and its famous lochs. Wherever you live, a dramatic landscape is often only a train trip away. Visiting somewhere unfamiliar will make your experience more impactful, too. Make sure it's safe to visit, that you have the right apparel and some emergency supplies of food and water in case you don't encounter a café or shop along the way.



MOSS SPOTTING



Moss – the modest, springy, green plant that sprawls over rocks and stones, embeds itself in our pathways and carpets woodlands – is all around us. We may not give it much thought, but moss is an important contributor to the health of our ecosystem and one of the first colonisers of bare ground. It absorbs large amounts of water, soaking up rainfall and producing a locally humid environment. It also serves as a home for the likes of woodlice and slugs – though birds are often wise to this and use their beaks to dig moss up looking for a tasty invertebrate meal.

Moss also has a beneficial effect on our senses and our emotional state. Colour-therapy studies show that the colour green promotes feelings of good health, harmony and balance within us – no surprise, then, that the abundance of green in nature can transform our mood. If you're not up for keeping indoor plants, moss is a fabulous alternative when it comes to filling your home with green stuff. Originally popular in Japan, moss balls will give a table decoration a tranquil, natural feel when arranged in a shallow dish. And a moss wreath made of different varieties has a pretty, otherworldly appearance. Moss's tactile nature makes it particularly pleasing, so investigate some moss crafts and see what you can make from moss you spot on a walk. You'll be surprised at how many varieties there are!

The most common kinds of moss can be found in woodland, by streams and rivers or growing on tree stumps. One variety, common haircap moss, resembles a miniature pine forest, can grow up to 40 cm tall and is found in more acidic areas of land like bogs, wet heaths and moorland. And silky forklet moss is characterised by thin, yellow-green leaves, curled in the same direction, forming clumps about 3 cm tall. This can be seen in more shaded areas such as ditches, banks and woodland, and it loves acidic soil. Other kinds of moss include swan's neck thyme moss, common tamarisk moss, glittering wood moss (so called because of its glossy leaves) and springy turf moss (the kind we see on our garden paths). Mosses thrive in winter weather, so this is an excellent time to become a moss expert. Take a checklist of the different varieties and spend a day photo-journaling your discoveries.



WANDER THROUGH A PINE FOREST



Pine trees are closely associated with winter, mostly because fir trees are associated with Christmas. Live pine trees are deciduous, which means unlike many other tree species they keep their needles all year round, and this makes pine forests a spectacular sight. Seen from above, they are a glorious sweep of bottle green, often running up and down hilly areas. And taking a walk through a pine forest makes for a fairy-tale experience. All varieties of pine give off a fresh, camphor-like scent that enables us to breathe more deeply, pumping oxygen into our lungs and up to our brains. Its psychological effects are important, too. Pine is a rejuvenator for body and mind, boosting our energy levels and our spirits.

Spending time in a pine forest in winter, when we may be feeling more mentally and physically fragile, can be a wonderfully restorative experience. Find your nearest area of pine trees, and put a note in your winter diary for some invaluable pine therapy. You could also take a bag out with you and collect some of the fallen pine cones you'll spot on your walk; along with pine cone bowling (see page 112), getting creative with pine cones will make for some fabulous home décor!

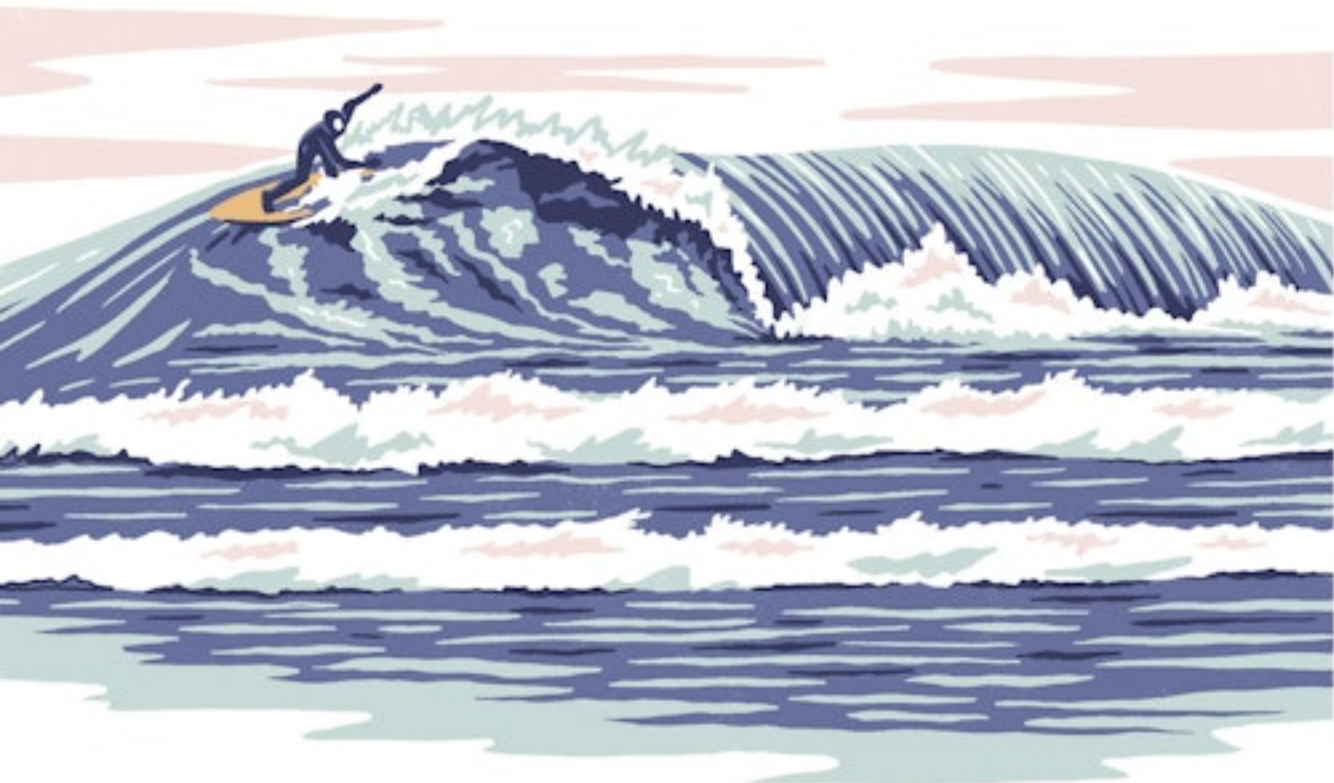


SURF'S UP!



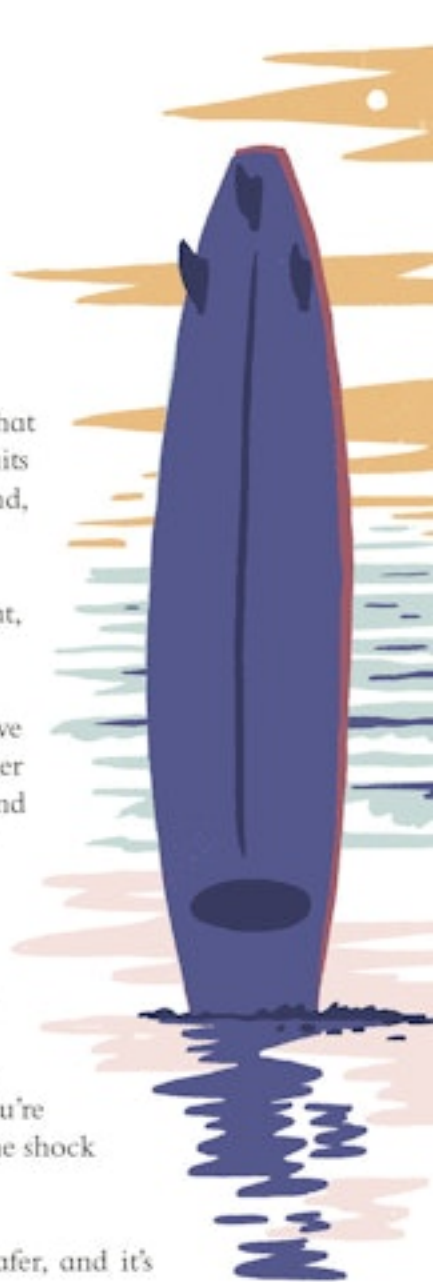
We usually associate surfing with bright Californian or Australian beaches, where golden-skinned fitties effortlessly ride the waves on hot summer days, but winter surfing is every bit as exhilarating, and even better for our mental health. Latest studies reveal that one of the reasons winter surfing has such a beneficial effect on our mental health is that the colder the water, the more our sympathetic (fight or flight) and parasympathetic (calm) nervous systems are stimulated. Our vagus nerve, which regulates our internal organ functions such as digestion, heart function and respiratory rate, is also stimulated. Simply put, we function at a high level when we winter surf, and it has been known to decrease symptoms of epilepsy, as well as to significantly reduce anxiety and stress.

If you're shivering at the thought of it, be reassured that while your mind and body are reaping the rewards of this cold-water exercise, you'll have a wetsuit to protect you from adverse effects of the water's temperature. You don't need to be an Olympic-level surfer, though you will need to be a proficient swimmer. You will also need to seek proper tuition from a qualified surf instructor, as well as declare any underlying health conditions to health professional before you start. If you're already a summer surfer, then you'll have a bit of a headstart, but there are still some important differences to bear in mind.



PREPARING FOR YOUR WINTER SURF

1. If you don't have your own surfboard, most surf beaches hire them out. Seek advice about the best board for your size and level of skill.
2. A well-fitting wetsuit is vital. Ask expert advice on what kind of thickness is best for winter temperatures. Wetsuits come in a variety of thicknesses, with fleeced lining and, ideally, liquid seams.
3. Your head, hands and feet need insulation, too: a hat, gloves and boots are essential.
4. Make sure your kit is ready to put on as soon as you arrive at the beach. Putting everything in an open basket, rather than a rucksack or holdall, means it's more accessible and can be put on quickly. Bring a towelling robe with you to help keep you warm when you get out.
5. It's vital that you're not too cold or too warm before you get in the water. If you're too cold, you won't be able to heat up once you're in the water. If you're changing outside in winter, it's a good idea to wear a padded coat and put your suit on underneath it. If you're changing inside, do it in an unheated room, otherwise the shock of the cold will be greater when you get into the sea.
6. You should always surf with at least one friend; it's safer, and it's more enjoyable.
7. When you're in the water, take notice of what your body is telling you. When you're paddling, the activity will generate body heat, but when you stop, your body starts to cool. If you are inactive for too long, your extremities will become numb and you could be at risk from hypothermia. A shorter, active session is easier on your body than a longer period with less movement. Don't hang around in the water: get out as soon as you're done.
8. Time is of the essence when you emerge from your surf. Make sure your robe and your clothes are ready and accessible for you to put on as quickly as possible. An insulated beanie hat is a must for your head. Make sure you've brought a flask with a hot drink, too; it'll warm you up instantly.



PURIFY YOUR HOME

In winter, we naturally spend more time inside, with the central heating and the oven on more often, and this means the air in our homes can get stuffy. Throwing open a window is one solution, though colder outside temperatures make it an undesirable and short-lived one. Another great option is to get some air purifying plants. Through photosynthesis, these plants not only convert the carbon dioxide we breathe out into fresh oxygen, they also help remove toxins, which can linger indoors, from the air we are breathing in.

The pretty 'eternity plant' is ideal for purifying-plant novices as it needs little light, can manage for over a week without water and doesn't attract insects. If you have a pet, though, it's a no-no as it can be toxic to animals. An erstwhile favourite, the spider plant is a great all-rounder; it looks distinctive, is low maintenance and pet-friendly. If you're looking for something a little different, the parlor palm will give your home a touch of summer, as it's essentially a miniature palm tree. Though it looks delicate, the parlor palm is pretty resilient, can sit in darker parts of the house and isn't harmful to animals. All it requires is a spritz of water on its leaves every few days. There's also the popular philodendron, which comes in several varieties, is lovely to look at and likes a dry atmosphere. If you have children or pets, it can be dangerous as the leaves are poisonous if ingested. You'll also need to make sure you don't over-hydrate this plant as it absorbs water slowly. There are lots more plants to consider, but be sure to seek expert advice if you're in doubt about a plant's safety. Once you've made your choice and positioned it in your home, make sure you turn it regularly towards the sunlight, even if it doesn't need much.



BRING ESSENTIAL OILS INTO YOUR LIFE

Essential oils are not only a wonderful sensory experience, they genuinely improve our wellbeing through their plant origins. We've talked about the power of lavender (see page 66), which smells divine and can have many positive effects on the human body, including slowing the heart rate and calming the nervous system. But there are many other deliciously scented plant oils available to make your home a restful and aromatic place to be.

Mandarin, bergamot and ylang-ylang are sweetly scented, can ease anxiety and help you sleep. You can also try peppermint or tea-tree oil, both of which ease stress and are marvellous, fresh-smelling natural decongestants, making them ideal for winter. Make sure you steer clear of using candles to heat up your oils in the bedroom; any candle left unattended presents a fire risk and your oil's effects may take a little while to permeate a room. Instead, use a room diffuser or spray them on your pillow.

For your living room, electric oil diffusers are good options. Diffusers come in a variety of shapes and sizes and work by gently boiling oil-infused water to give off aromatic steam. In your bathroom, use a reed diffuser to scent the room, or add your essential oils to carrier oils such as coconut and jojoba, so they can be safely added to your bath.

Make sure you are clear on which oils are safe to use. Some plants, even though they're organic, can contain materials that are toxic or cause skin irritation. Be very wary of buying any that are not proven to be safe, whether generally or for you specifically (particularly if you are adding drops to a bath). Take your time choosing the right oils and scents for you. If possible, sample them before you buy. Now relax and enjoy a wonderfully pampering experience.



CHASE A STORM



Storm-chasing has been a mental-health pursuit since the 19th century, practised with the goal of attaining a visceral connection to nature. The theory is that by walking towards and not away from extreme meteorological conditions, we heighten our engagement with natural forces, gain more mental focus and relinquish the control we cling to that often only makes us feel more stressed. In 1874 one notable storm chaser, John Muir, climbed to the top of a 100-foot spruce tree during a wild storm in Sierra, California, and clung there for hours until the storm subsided. He wrote of his experience, 'Never before did I enjoy so noble an exhilaration of motion.' Serious storm chasers have described it as 'peak experience', giving them a profound understanding of their place in the universe – and 'a beautiful, cosmic moment'.

For most of us, the thought of facing extreme weather is understandably daunting, and we don't need to put ourselves in any danger to reap the benefits that come from storm-chasing. Taking a walk in windy conditions or through a light snow storm can be magical – a wonderfully bracing and humbling experience. It is also a valuable reminder that we cannot control everything around us, and that developing acceptance of the literal and metaphorical storms that arise in our lives is important for decreasing fear and anxiety and increasing mental strength and resilience. Make sure you have a tracking device on your phone to avoid getting lost, then relax and enjoy your wander.



PREPARING FOR A WINTER WONDERLAND WALK

There's an old saying, 'there's no such as thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothes', so before embracing the elements, make sure you have the right gear.

1. Don't wear cotton or denim, which quickly absorb water and will stay wet, making you much colder if you are out in snow or rain. Instead, wear layers of man-made fabrics or silk.
2. For your base layer, material such as polyester wick moisture away from your skin and keep you from getting clammy. The next layer should be a top that you can easily take off if you get too hot – something fleecy or made of wool is great. Then you'll need an insulating layer, such as a quilted down or polyester microfleece vest or waistcoat. These will be more effective than an extra jacket underneath your final outerlayer.
3. For your outerlayer, a rainproof, windproof, breathable jacket made from a material such as Gore-tex is ideal.
4. For really cold conditions, consider wearing tights under your trousers to keep you cosy – tights made of silk or polypropylene are great.
5. Flexible trousers are a must: running leggings or tracksuit bottoms made of wicking polyester fabric are ideal. You could also invest in some waterproof, fleece-lined trousers, which will keep you dry and warm.
6. You can buy socks combining wicking polypropylene and wool layers from specialist shops, and they're worth investing in. Make sure they're not so thick that you can't put your boots on, though!
7. You'll need flexible, athletic footwear that's waterproof and windproof. A lightweight hiking boot or trail running shoe could also work. Seek expert advice if you're in any doubt.
8. Finally, don't forget a fleece-lined beanie hat to cover your ears and thermal gloves to keep your hands warm. And a wool or fleece scarf or snood will keep your neck cosy.



LET'S GO TRIG BAGGING



of us who like to attach a purpose to our outdoor experience and enjoy a challenge, trig bagging could be just the thing. And there are plenty of them in the UK: 6190, to be precise. That should keep you busy. Here are some tips to help you prepare.

1. Set yourself a goal to find a certain number of pillars over the winter months. Look for pillars that are within a reasonable/accessible distance. Once you've got that information, think about ways you could combine your pillar search with a weekend walking adventure.
2. If you can, download the Ordnance Survey map on your phone; it's important for GPS location tracking. There are dedicated trig-bagging websites that will guide you to apps that specifically map trig pillars. If you can't get online easily (or at all) while you're out, a physical Ordnance Survey map is a must.
3. You may have to travel by car or train to reach some pillars, but make sure you allow for as much walking as possible.
4. Prepare for the weather, and for remote countryside with no shops for miles. This means layered, windproof and rainproof clothing, footwear fit for hilly terrain and supplies of food and water.

Trig pillars were once used for Ordnance Survey mapping of geographical points on high ground around the country, though they've now been replaced by GPS.

You may well have seen these stone monuments without knowing what they are. Trig bagging – finding and checking off these pillars wherever they are – is an increasingly popular pastime, combining exercise with a satisfying mission. Trig baggers are serious about their hobby; it takes them all over the country and offers a slice of history. And just like pillboxes, the concrete pillars have an almost ghostly presence, standing abandoned on lonely hilltops.

VISIT A CITY FARM

This is one for city dwellers who may have limited time, a tight budget and no outside space, but who are passionate about animals. You'll find city farms in many urban areas, and they are truly wonderful places to visit. They usually house a wide variety of animals, the likes of which you may only otherwise see if you make time to visit the countryside. A city farm accommodates animals like horses, goats, sheep and sometimes even llamas. Many of the farms run volunteer workshops, where you can muck in and learn how the farm is run and cares for its occupants, giving you the chance to get up close to cute bunnies or snorting piglets. City farms are oases of rural joy, practically on your doorstep. Here are a few things to consider before your visit.



1. If it's voluntary work you're after rather than a visit, be aware that you can't just turn up at a farm. Check out the proper procedure first by visiting your chosen farm's website. Volunteer workshops will almost certainly require an application process. If you're working with animals, the farm staff will need to know that you're ready to do so. Be prepared to be put on a waiting list, or to travel further afield to secure a place.
2. Consider whether you have any allergies that can be triggered by animals. If you do have an allergy, you can still visit, but you may have to keep your distance from the animals.
3. Dress in warm, layered clothing that you don't mind getting dirty. You'll need practical and comfortable footwear: wellies are ideal because you can wipe them down if they get muddy.



GET ENGAGED WITH BIODOMES

If you're passionate about our ecosystem and reducing chemical and pesticide use, then you'll find biodomes fascinating. Simply put, a biodome is a self-contained and self-sufficient environment for plant and animal nurturing and cultivation – it's a space that has no interaction with the outside world. Inside this large, usually spherical, super-powerful green house, plants and animals work naturally together to regenerate more life. It's literally a circle of life.

If you have the outside space, it's possible to build your very own mini biodome with a special kit. It's an ambitious undertaking, so it's not for the faint-hearted or for those who have limited time and budget. If you are willing and able to provide your own home-grown food, minus the chemical cocktails, and contribute to the health of the environment, it's a worthy undertaking. But don't worry if that's not possible – there are large biodomes all over the world that you can visit, including the Eden Project in Cornwall. The Eden Project is the world's largest rainforest in captivity, and a living example of regeneration and sustainability. It's set within 30 acres of stunning garden, with sculpture, art and cutting-edge architecture, as well as inspiring demonstrations on sustainability.



GO SLEDGING

Some meteorological experts say that at the current rate of global warming, within just a few decades the snowfall we are used to seeing most winters in Europe may cease altogether. With this in mind, it feels like a good time to sing the mood-boosting virtues of sledging. If you don't have the budget for an expensive skiing holiday but long for a slice of frosty fun, time spent on a good old-fashioned sledge is a marvellous winter de-stressor. You can buy many different kinds of sledges or toboggans including old-fashioned, wooden ones or more modern, plastic ones, so do a little research into what size and shape is best for you as an adult. Here are a few points to bear in mind.

1. If you have any underlying health conditions, including osteoporosis, then you must seek medical advice first.
2. It's vital to dress for the snow and ice – you'll need a hat, gloves, warm waterproof trousers and snow-friendly, rubber-soled boots if possible. Thermal underwear and layers made of polypropylene are advisable. Wear a snood rather than a scarf, which might get caught on a passing branch or under the runners.
3. It's important to protect your head, and a cycling helmet is perfect for this.
4. Make sure you apply sunscreen, some chapstick and wear sunglasses. The sun's rays can still be fierce in snowy conditions and the extreme cold will dry out your lips.
5. If you're sledging some distance from home or from a café, then bring a flask with a hot drink, and pop some snacks in a bag for when you finish sledging.



BATHS, SPAS AND SAUNAS

Showers are great. They're environmentally friendly, refreshing and time-efficient, and in general should be our go-to form of body-cleansing. But the health benefits of a good bath are plentiful. Though extremely hot baths can put a strain on the heart, a good steamy bath better enables oxygen intake, improves blood flow and lung function, clears sinuses, relieves joint or muscle pain and reduces inflammation by calming the nervous system – soothing anxiety and stress levels. On a basic level, bathing compels us to slow down and focus on the present, inducing a meditative state of mind. Quite simply, bathtime is an all-round, healing experience. To heighten your relaxation, add bath salts or essential oils to your bath water (see page 141). Consider time spent in the tub as an act of self-love and care!

If you're looking for a little more drama, an outdoor sauna in winter is a truly exhilarating experience. In Scandinavian culture, the 'sauna in the snow' ritual is a favourite part of the long, dark winter. It's a time to relax with family and friends and benefits us both physically and mentally, though a little courage is involved. The idea is to work up a sweat in the sauna, then, while your body is still hot, roll around in the snow for a thorough cleanse and exfoliation. You don't need to employ this extreme method to reap the reward of the hot-cold treatment, though. If you have the budget, research your nearest outdoor spa hotel or facility and consider booking yourself in for an experience that guarantees to press your reset button.



MAKE BEAUTIFUL BATH SALTS

Heighten your bathtime experience with your own customised, aromatic and relaxing bath salts. They're simple to make, requiring just salt, essential oils and baking soda.

1. You'll need a glass jar container (a clean jam jar will work well), some coarse sea salt, epsom salts, baking soda and essential oils. Try a few if you don't already have a favourite and turn to page 141 if you need more info.
2. For natural food colouring, collect winter rose petals, spread them in a single layer on a paper towel on a plate, cover them with more paper towel and pop them in the microwave for 45 to 60 seconds. This will draw the moisture from your petals. Leave them to cool for a few minutes.
3. In a large mixing bowl, combine 6 parts coarse sea salt to 3 parts epsom salts (these soothe tired muscles and ease inflammation) to one part baking soda (this will soften your bath water and helps with skin irritation). Now add a few drops of your essential oil.
4. Now, gently stir in your rose petals, distributing them as evenly as you can through your salt-oils mixture. You'll start to inhale the delicious fresh scent quite quickly.
5. Put the lid on your container, label it and leave for few hours to settle.
6. Enjoy!



CELEBRATE THE WINTER SOLSTICE

It can be hard to feel inspired by the dark days of winter, though it might be some comfort to know that the winter blues have been a common issue for millennia.

In Greek mythology, Persephone (daughter of the god, Zeus) was banished to the underworld for the winter season, and Shakespeare wrote, 'a sad tale's best for winter'. The winter solstice, however, is a cause for celebration, marking the end of shorter, dark days and the beginning of our journey to spring. It happens in the same 24-hour period in December around the world. In the Northern Hemisphere, it marks the shortest day – or the longest night – of the year. The Sun and the North Pole are at their farthest points from each other on this day. It will come as no surprise, then, to learn that the word 'solstice' comes from the Latin, *solstitium* – meaning 'sun stands still'.

Cultures all over the world have their own unique traditions when it comes to the winter solstice, but what unifies them is a profound reverence for natural forces and a communal cheer for the lighter days to come. Embracing and accepting this inevitable occurrence is a healthy step on the road to improving our mental health, particularly if we mark its passing by paying homage to nature. By simply scattering seeds for birds, we are giving back to our wild community. Or we can celebrate the sun and the brighter, lighter days to come with a candle ritual; placing an unlit candle in the centre of a ring of candles, we light each candle, leaving our central 'sun' candle until last. During this ritual, we can focus on gratitude for what we have and for Earth's wondrous natural cycles. We can also take inspiration from seasonal ingredients – such as celeriac, parsnips, squash, fennel and cranberries – and nature's superstar spice: ginger.



SOLSTICE GINGERBREAD

Ginger has been a traditional winter-solstice spice in Europe ever since it was brought over by crusaders around the year 1100. Delicious homemade gingerbread is a wonderful, celebratory treat for any time of the day.

INGREDIENTS FOR TWO DOZEN PORTIONS

- 225 g of self-raising flour, a teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda, 2 tablespoons of ginger and a teaspoon of mixed spice
- 100 g each of diced butter, black treacle, light muscovado sugar and golden syrup
- One free-range egg (beaten) and 275 ml of full fat milk



METHOD

1. Preheat your oven to 180° C or Gas mark 4, then line a 30 x 23 cm baking tray with baking paper.
2. Mix your flour, bicarbonate of soda, mixed spices and ginger in a bowl.
3. Now heat your butter, treacle, syrup and sugar in a saucepan until the butter melts. Leave to cool for a minute or two, then pour into your mixed dry ingredients, add your beaten egg, add your milk and beat the whole mixture with a wooden spoon until it's smooth.
4. Pour into your tin and bake for approximately 35 minutes, or until it's golden brown and springy to the touch.
5. Serve warm with vanilla ice cream. You can freeze any leftovers for up to a week, or wrap tightly in clingfilm and put in a tin for eating within three to four days.



FLOWERS IN ICE



As the last of the winter months approaches, what better way to capture winter's beauty, and pamper yourself with a wonderful sensory treat than to make some stunning, romantic floral ice cubes from the season's edible wildflowers? Pansies, violas, lavender and borage (also known as the 'star flower') are vividly coloured, delicate and utterly gorgeous when crystallised in ice cubes, and they're good for you, too. Add your pretty cubes to a cocktail or a refreshing glass of water, and give yourself a real treat.

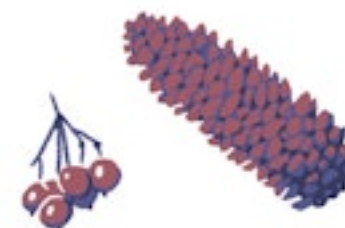
You'll need a silicone ice-cube tray (choose one that has larger cube shapes for optimum effect), some edible flowers (like those mentioned above, but do research others that may be more abundant where you live) and, for extra clear ice, use distilled, boiled and then cooled water.

HOW TO MAKE:

1. Gather your flowers, making sure you have permission to pick them if they are not from your garden. Ideally, you'll need a mix of varieties of different colours, and those with smaller, petite petals are ideal.
2. Cut your flower stems, leaving no more than half an inch of each stem.
3. Fill your ice tray with water to a quarter of the depth.
4. Now place your flowers face-down in the water and put the tray in the freezer.
5. When the water has frozen, remove the tray and add more water, this time to half the depth of the tray. Now put the tray back in the freezer.
6. As before, when the water has frozen, remove the tray and fill it right up to the top, then put it back in the freezer.
7. When all the water in your tray has completely frozen, remove the tray and serve your floral ice cubes with a drink – for yourself, your friends or, if you're feeling romantic, your beloved other half.



ORGANISE A WINTER TREASURE HUNT



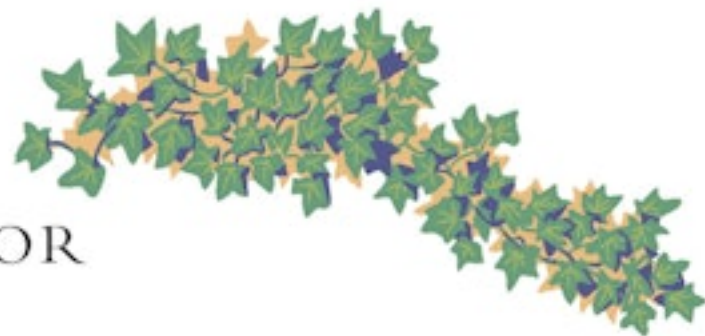
A fabulous way to motivate yourself and your friends or family to get outside in the winter months is to make it a mission, by organising a nature treasure hunt! This activity, closely associated with childhood, is a wonderfully comforting form of play which combines fun with exercise, sharpens mental agility and, most importantly, gets us out into the crisp winter air.

HOW TO SET IT UP

1. First, choose an area to conduct the treasure hunt. This can be somewhere familiar to you, or somewhere you have thoroughly investigated for all its nooks and crannies. Your local park or woodland might work, or your garden if you have one – and if it's a communal garden, you can invite your neighbours and get to know them better. Just make sure you won't be trespassing.
2. Take a notebook with you for your recy. Note down each hiding place, focusing on any significant landmarks and the shape of the space. Googling a map of the area when you get home will help you to create your map.
3. Get creative with drawing your map, using coloured pens to indicate grass, flowers and woodland, any notable buildings, benches or statues, then create your clues. This is the fun part where you get to think up riddles that your players have to unpick in order to find the treasure.
4. Now choose your treasure. This can be anything from beads or marbles to natural materials such as winter leaves or clusters of safe berries. Small objects are better. Put these in small plastic containers, then return to your trail and hide them in holes, hang them from branches, or bury them underground.
5. Roll up copies of your map and your clues like a scroll, and hand out to your friends.
6. Check the weather and pick a day for the hunt accordingly. Avoid rain, but a snowy treasure hunt has a truly magical feel to it.



UPDATE YOUR DÉCOR



Are you looking to add something else to your winter mental-health armoury? Some visual tricks can go a long way towards lifting your mood, and taking inspiration from the natural world keeps your connection to it. Whether it's through the colours and textures in your house or the lock-screen wallpaper on your devices, surrounding yourself with the very best of nature's colours and materials is guaranteed to make you feel more positive.

If you're up for some practical work, painting your walls to reflect nature's colours can transform a room, and your mood along with it. If your living space is small, think about painting or wallpapering just one wall in a room. For a springtime feel, try a pale, leafy green or a sky blue. If you're looking for a summery colour, try a sunny yellow, and for autumnal or wintry vibes, russets and golds are cosy and majestic. The best way to keep your connection to nature during the winter months is to gather natural finds from outside and bring them in to your home. Fallen leaves, cones, wood and wildflowers will infuse a room with the smells and sights of winter. You can leave them as they are, or get creative with spray paint, ribbons and design. Even if your taste is for minimal décor, touches of nature around your home – a trail of ivy over a shelf or mantelpiece, a bowl of sparkling pine cones, or glorious conkers, or an arrangement of seasonal flowers such as bluebells, pansies, violas, cyclamen or hellebores in your kitchen or bedroom – will transform your living space. In a season that often seems the least colourful, winter's natural beauty is there to be found and celebrated, even when you can't get outside as much as you'd like.



ADAPT YOUR ROUTINES



We are creatures of habit, and we can find ourselves stuck in the same old daily rituals and routines, day in, day out, for years. Some of these routines are important and healthy, but some are actually a way of avoiding our feelings. Here are some ideas to help you change up your routine.

1. Make a list of your regular activities – those guaranteed to boost your mood, like reading or cooking, as well as those that may be more like crutches such as drinking alcohol, smoking, staring at your screen or scrolling through social media feeds.
2. Consider how you can cut out or cut down on these crutch habits and have something lined up to replace them – or make more time for things you know make you feel healthy and happy.
3. Don't put pressure on yourself to stop a habit cold turkey, even one you know is not too healthy, as this may exacerbate anxiety and stress.
4. Do reflect on which habits or activities leave you feeling good for a sustained period. Swapping emotional crutches such as endless screen-scrolling for a handful of the activities in this book will do wonders for your emotional wellbeing.
5. Don't forget, you can combine really worthwhile passions, such as reading, with time in nature. Audiobooks and podcasts can keep you connected to stories, news or comedy while you're strolling through the park or across a forest. Simply by breathing in fresh air and walking past trees and flowers or on a path strewn with snow-tipped winter leaves, you are treating yourself to a wellbeing-enhancing experience.
6. Always think about how kind you are being to yourself with any activity. Listen to your body and mind when they tell you something isn't working for you.



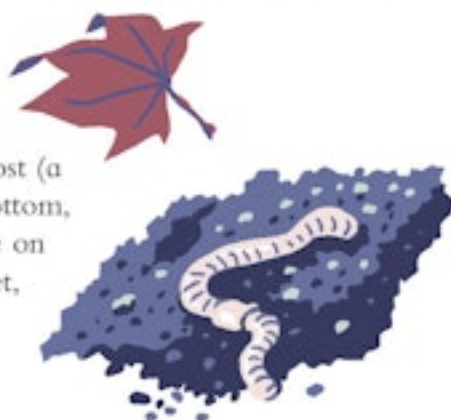
NURTURING THE EARTH

One simple way to really feel connected to nature and thus improve our mental wellbeing, is by giving nature a helping hand in winter. If you're lucky enough to have a garden or decent-sized balcony then you can start there. If you don't have any outside space of your own, you can still do your bit in a friend or relative's garden, or your local green space.

A wonderful way to help nature is to make a compost heap. Compost is formed of organic matter, which improves the structure of soil and its capacity to retain water and vital nutrients for plant growth.

MAKING GOOD COMPOST

1. You'll need something to contain your compost (a plastic moulded container with a perforated bottom, or a wooden crate, but do seek expert advice on this if you're not sure). Old pieces of carpet, combined with your compost, will keep in the heat that's made from what's called 'aerobic bacteria', which nicely accelerates the composting process.
2. You'll need two kinds of waste: 'wet' waste such as grass clippings and 'dry' waste such as fallen leaves, dry plant stems, wood shavings or straw. Alternate layers of wet and dry waste.
3. Make sure your compost container is positioned so that it's sheltered from the wind, which will cool its contents down.
4. Rest your container on top of the soil, to allow earthworms to tunnel in and help the composting process. To keep out vermin, put a layer of chicken wire on top of the soil and underneath your container.
5. The composting process can take up to a year, but if your heap is insulated well, and you add in 'compost maker' (you get this from any gardening centre or a credited online source), then it will speed things up considerably.



GIVE NATURE A HELPING HAND

Though it's important not to put food out for wildlife too regularly (they need to be self-reliant), in winter's harshest conditions, a little extra help is important. There are lots of ways to make life easier for wildlife in winter, but here are a few that are easy to implement in your own garden or a friend's.

1. For birds, scatter or put out seeds or food waste, such as berries, or fruit like pears, apples or plums.
2. Hungry hedgehogs appreciate a little dog or cat food (though make sure it isn't fish based) and are partial to the odd boiled and chopped-up egg.
3. Squirrels love hazelnuts and walnuts, but they'll also tuck in to sunflower seeds and tasty carrots, too.
4. For all wildlife, leaving out fresh water is invaluable for hydration, as freezing temperatures can make natural water sources inaccessible.
5. If a pond ices over, break the surface so any pondlife can escape.
6. Empty bird feeders, boxes and baths and clean them with some hot water and mild detergent. This encourages good hygiene in our feathered friends, and keeps them in tip-top condition.
7. Even if you're tempted, leave pruning herbaceous plants (those plants whose flowers die in autumn, but whose roots stay alive all year) until spring. Unpruned, they provide great homes for sheltering insects.
8. Make sure that any netting, such as tennis netting or football netting, is lifted just above the ground so that wildlife doesn't get tangled up or injured in it.



WINTER PHOTOSHOOT

As with all the other seasons, capturing photos of the world outside during winter reminds us not only of its beauty, but of its vital importance to all our lives. The wildlife, flowers and plants, the snow, rain, sun and wind, the tiniest of living things... all are working to keep the planet alive, to provide us with vitamin-rich food and keep our immune systems strong.

But in order to truly feel the gifts that nature gives us, we have to pay attention and show it respect. The goal is to learn to love each season for its unique contribution and embrace the rain along with the sun and the cold with the hot. We want to celebrate nature's incredible evolving palette and incorporate as much of it into our lives as we can.

You can capture photos of winter from its start in November to its easing in late February/early March by creating a winter photo album. Try to get up in time to watch dawn rise; on a clear morning it will blaze a tawny yellow through bare tree silhouettes. Have fun spotting foxes and squirrels, listening to the birds' dawn chorus and marvelling at the patterns made by frost on grass and leaves. Look up at the sky and snap pictures of the changes in its colour, as it turns from crisp and blue to dark and stormy. Create eternal memories of the colours you see during winter, from snowdrops and scarlet berries, to rich-green ivy and brown leaves on the ground. The purpose of your journal is to reflect your emotions as they evolve throughout the season, and to remind you of your own cycle which mirrors that of the natural world.

Snowy adventures filled the pages of the books we read as children, transporting us to magical worlds. But as we move into adulthood, we often lose a little of our awe and excitement. Photographing the natural spaces around us as they are blanketed with snow – where the trees sparkle and icy patterns form on the ground – is a wonderful excuse to get outside and breathe in that frosty air, feeling the exhilaration of being wrapped up warm as our cheeks tingle.

Take a friend with you and capture an afternoon on film. You could also set yourself a creative project: build a mini igloo, or a snow-person. Depending on where you live, snow is not guaranteed to happen every year, so make the most of it when it comes!

SNOWY PHOTOSHOOT TIPS

1. Make sure you have the right clothes and footwear. Thermal layers of man-made fabric are best for your upper half, along with a windproof coat, thermal gloves and a hat. Flexible sports leggings are ideal – avoid denim, which will get wet and stay wet.
2. Footwear is important as slipping and sliding on icy paths can be perilous and you need grip on the soles of your shoes. Hiking trainers have good grip, but walking boots are ideal. Do some research and find the best boots for you.
3. Keep moving if you can. This will get your heart pumping enough to keep you warm.
4. As with sledging, if you have back or joint issues, or suffer with weak bones, avoid icy conditions. Tramping through fresh snow on grass is probably fine, but trying to navigate slippery pavements will be stressful – which is the exact opposite of how you should feel on your snowy photoshoot!



