



Jonathan Levy

Nature as a Nutrient

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As part of the Garden's Year of the Healing Garden theme, this article is the second in a series of contributed pieces from health professionals who are sharing new views on gardens as healing places.

Like many of us in the beautiful Pacific Northwest, I feel blessed to live in such an exquisite part of the country. Oregon is known for its beaches and mountains and forests. The hills above Portland contain one of the largest natural environments of any urban area within the United States.

I like to take my daily walks in a local wetland by my house. Each season brings exciting new changes. During winter I look for the emerging signs of spring: the first buds of the beautiful native Indian plum or the green leaves of the stinging nettles poking through the leaf litter. The daily changes in our environment encourage us to look beyond the scenery. In fact, recent research shows that our surrounding environment is more than just scenery—it can create a health-promoting nutrient!

We instinctively know that our experience within nature is healing. A walk in the nearby woods or in a wonderful garden can be more than a physical hike. Perhaps this is why child advocacy expert Richard Louv's 2005 book *The Last Child in the*

Woods became a best seller. Louv explains the relationship between the natural world and children's development, citing fascinating research showing how hyperactive children naturally calm down after a short walk in nature.

In yet another study, we have learned that children who grow up on a street with trees have much lower rates of asthma than those



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who grow up in a strictly urban environment. More and more, we're discovering that access to natural areas provides health benefits—for people of *all* ages.

In my work as a naturopathic physician, I have long known about the importance of botanical medicine for health. But even within the field of natural medicine, practitioners have long overlooked the

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healing role of natural environments. For years, I have asked my patients about diet, lifestyle, exercise and vitamin supplements—but I now extend that inquiry to help patients think of nature as another nutrient. I ask them how much time they spend in non-structured "nature play." Research shows that it's important to wander about without a specific agenda. That means playing golf in a beautiful green course

is good—but wandering the trails around the course and just observing is perhaps even better.

I think it helps all of us to consider nature a nutrient that contributes to emotional and physical well-being. It's a natural antidote to our stressful, modern lives. As we check our minimum daily requirements of vitamins, minerals or essential fats, we can add "vitamin N" to the list. No matter the season, remember to expose yourself regularly to the natural world. You may discover a healthier you.