

Celebrating the opening of the York House Community Garden

2nd July 2021

The importance of enjoying plants for their sensory qualities is widely recognised as having healthy benefits. Lead by local charity Dose of Nature, supported by members of the York House Society with staff from Richmond Council, Squires Garden Centre & Continental Landscapes, an under-utilised area in York House gardens has been transformed into an oasis of well – being.

Plants have been selected for their smell, look, listen and touch, greatly expanding the sensory garden at Strathmore SEN School at Petersham. Cuttings from that garden had been cultivated and the Mayor, Cllr. Geoff Acton was asked to formally open the gardens and to plant the cuttings.

CEO of Dose of Nature, Dr. Alison Greenwood acknowledged the Mayor's support for their charity and the high demand for their services. The community garden was a place where people could learn more about the importance of plants and their healing properties. She paid tribute to all those who had helped make the facility posable.



The Mayor with Alison Greenwood from charity Dose of Nature & Paul Leonard, Chairman of the York House Society at the opening of the Community Garden.



The Science: Nature's Active Ingredients

Fractals

Fractals are self-repeating patterns that can be found throughout the natural world, but are uncommon in human-made structures. They are found in the small details of nature, such as snowflakes, plant leaves, petal formations, and tree branches, and in large natural phenomena, such as ocean waves, river systems, clouds, and galaxy clusters.

Scientists believe that our visual system is hard-wired to understand fractals. They argue that just as other human systems, such as our lungs, capillaries and neurons,

are branched into fractals, so too is the movement of the eye's retina. When a scene is too complex, such as a busy urban street, it is more difficult to take in and can lead to discomfort. Conversely, when faced with common natural features we evolved alongside, such as raindrops on water or branches of trees, our visual cortex is in harmony. Researchers have found that when people view fractal patterns, they recover more quickly from stress, and have increased alpha wave activity, an indicator of a wakefully relaxed state.



Phytoncides

Phytoncides are naturally occurring chemical compounds secreted by plants and trees to protect themselves from threats such as bacteria, insects and fungi. Breathing in these substances has been shown to significantly increase the number of natural killer cells and natural killer cell activity, signs of a healthy immune system, essential for both physical and mental health.

Exposure to phytoncides has been found to decrease levels of stress hormones, increase hours of sleep, and lower blood pressure and heart rate. Furthermore, phytoncides suppress sympathetic nervous activity (the 'fight-flight' process) and increase parasympathetic nervous activity (the 'rest-digest' process), bringing the nervous system into balance and creating a calm, relaxed feeling.

Nature Sounds

Research has consistently demonstrated the links between noise pollutants and stress. Natural surroundings often represent respite from noise pollution, and are therefore experienced as peaceful, restorative and stress-reducing.

Numerous studies have demonstrated reductions in cortisol levels (an indicator of stress), and improvements in mood and mental alertness, when stressed

participants are exposed to nature sounds. The three most soothing sounds to humans have been found to be wind, water and birdsong.

People's preferences for the sounds of nature may also have an evolutionary basis, for example, we associate birds singing in the morning with alertness and safety, and running water with a clean, fresh water source.

Soil Bacteria

There is growing evidence to suggest that breathing in, playing in, digging in and even eating soil may be good for our health. *Mycobacterium vaccae* is the microorganism in soil that has been found to affect the brain in a number

of positive ways. Studies have shown that soil bacteria to be associated with increases in measures of happiness and resilience, improved cognitive functioning, and reductions in stress.

For more information on nature's 'active ingredients', take a look at Dose of Nature's website: www.doseofnature.org.uk



Notice nature: look, smell, listen, touch, taste - it's good for you!

Why do we protect ourselves with hoods and umbrellas the moment it rains, and yet enjoy standing under pouring water every morning in the shower?

Why do we call it a 'miserable grey day', and yet delight in painting our homes all manner of 'cool, chic greys'?

Why do we tell our crawling toddlers that it's 'too cool', 'too hot', 'too wet', or 'too dry' to go outside, when their instinct tells them they'd love nothing more than to be outside digging in the mud?

Our instincts tell us to engage with nature - perhaps it's time we started to listen.



Why is nature good for our mental health and wellbeing?

Environmental psychologists believe that, since we evolved in nature, we have a biological need to connect with it. We love nature because we learned to love the things that helped us to survive. We feel comfortable in nature because that is where we have lived for most of our time on earth. In other words, we are genetically determined to love the natural world: it is in our DNA.

Dr Qing Li, one of the world's leading experts on the health benefits of natural environments, agrees.

"We are 'hard-wired' to affiliate with the natural world, and just as our health improves when we are in it, so our health suffers when we are disconnected from it"

Today, many scientists and medical professionals are beginning to recognise that this affinity for the natural world is fundamental to our health, and a growing body of evidence suggests that contact with nature may be as vital to our wellbeing as regular exercise and a healthy diet.



To achieve the mental health benefits of nature, you don't need to have access to forests or rolling hills: nature's psychological benefits can be experienced in any natural green space, such as a local park, riverside low path, or any city garden. Wander around York House Gardens and feel uplifted and inspired, relaxed and refreshed.

"I only went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay till sundown, for going out I found was really going in."

John Muir, Philosopher and Naturalist (1838-1914)

"How happy I am to be able to walk among the shrubs, the trees, the woods, the grass and the rocks! For the woods, the trees and the rocks give man the resonance he needs."

Ludwig von Beethoven (1770-1827)

"Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better."

Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

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