

Karen Hugg

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**LEAF YOUR  
TROUBLES  
BEHIND**

*How to Destress  
and Grow Happiness  
through Plants*

 **Prometheus Books**  
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For my sister, Anne,  
who despite illness, still enjoys the trees



# Contents

Introduction vii

## **Part I: Digging in the Soul's Dirt 1**

1. A Modern Dilemma of Our Own Making 3
2. Slowing the Stress and Getting into Green Leisure 17
3. Growing Your Green Personality 33

## **Part II: No-Goals Green Leisure 45**

4. Learning and Imagining in Green 47
5. Experiencing Plants through the Senses 59
6. Idly Playing in the Plant World 75
7. Supporting a Little Green Life 89
8. Uniting with Like Nature Minds 103





9. Recognizing What We've Grown 119
10. Exercising Outside without Trying 135
- Part III: Blooming with Joy 149**
11. The Healing Power of Houseplants 151
12. Creating an Indoor, Green Leisure Lounge 165
13. Creating an Outdoor, Green Leisure Lounge 187
14. Maintaining Nature's Magic 211
- Acknowledgments 219
- Appendix: Branching Outward 221
- Notes 231
- About the Author and Illustrator 243





# Introduction

*If you look the right way, you can see that the whole world is a garden.*—Frances Hodgson Burnett, author



## CALIFORNIA DREAMING IN A CLOUD TOWN BACKYARD



Happiness. It's what we all want, right? Well, when I think of the word *happiness*, I think of plants. It's the delight I feel when a closed blossom on a cherry tree suddenly opens. When a delicate white bean sprout emerges from black soil. A massive tangle of tree roots decaying in a forest. Even the common, annoying, ubiquitous, never-dying dandelion. Sometimes when I see their tiny yellow heads peppering the lawn, I think, *I need to get out there and pull those damn things*. Then a bee lands on a sunshiny flower and I think, *It's feeding the little bee! How could you even consider yanking it?* These silly, wondrous moments make my heart—forgive the pun—bloom. I pause when I see these teeny green miracles, feeling a wild surge of excitement in my chest, in awe of how they did what they did so fast, wondering where the energy came from and why I, a longtime gardener and apparently still a rookie of the natural world, once again missed the signs.

I mean, I am a certified ornamental horticulturalist (which, let's face it, is a fancy term for garden designer), so I should be used to





all of this nature stuff by now. But I never am. Every fall when I see those purple pearls on a beautyberry, I shake my head in disbelief at their perfectly round iridescence. Every summer when my rugosa rose creates a complexly intertwined blossom that steams with fragrance, I smell it for the billionth time. And every spring when I pass a zelkova tree in a mall parking lot, I smile at its new corrugated leaves unfurling on a forlorn winter skeleton, impressed that it bounced back despite being surrounded by heavy concrete.

This is why I go on. How I cope. How, in years past, I've survived the stresses of a fast-paced tech job and my husband's stage-four cancer treatment (which, thankfully, he survived). How we got through raising three traumatized, loudly active adopted children, one who is cognitively delayed, into happy-enough teenagers. And today, as I deal with the aftereffects of the pandemic and my sister's cancer diagnosis, plants offer me silent, steady hope for renewal.

If you're anything like me, you've been—or are—a stressed-out human living in a noisy home with lots of busy chaos and distractions. Every time you turn on the news, you see more corruption, violence, and discrimination. If you have kids, you may bounce from concentrating on work for your job to helping a child with homework to changing a diaper. The toilet and sink are dirty—again. And a year or so ago during the pandemic, you bundled up like a giant burrito just to brave the germy grocery store to feed your family. That's when you're not *already* grieving the loss of a family member or friend or coworker or job. Then, in the evening, when all is said and done, forget about seeing friends or taking in a movie, because you're supposed to be disciplined enough to exercise and not eat pasta and not drink away your feelings, right? Yeah, right.

So how do we cope with all of this? Well, one way is by getting outside. Yes, that place without glowing screens or vacuums or diapers. And by "outside," I mean a park or woods or, if you're lucky, your own backyard. Every day, I spend at least some time amid greenery, which can mean a variety of things. Strolling up the street amid the tall firs and cedars with my husband. Trimming the dry leaves from my houseplants. Even kneeling before weeds and yanking them from the ground. What it doesn't mean is growing the perfect peony or arranging a beautiful vase of exotic leaves. Forget that idea and the social media platform it rode in on.





On days when I have the most time, coping with stress means putting on my gloves and hiking to the back of my yard. It takes only a minute, but when I get there, it feels like I've arrived in California, somewhere coastal and pristine, like Santa Barbara without the outrageous prices. It's a whole other world there, full of bright light and sandy soil and hot-weather shrubs. Happy bees buzz around ceanothus and lavender. The rockrose leaves waft spicy scents. I can even see my house in the short distance—you know, that stressful place with the vacuums and screens and diapers? What I've discovered is that, by placing myself in this sunny garden, I gain a strange, calming sense of relief. A relaxed feeling like—dare I say it—everything will be okay? I don't know why I feel this way. I just do.

Wait—yes, I know why. It's because I'm in an aimless state among greenery, almost as if I'm on a break from work or regular life. Down in my own California dream, I don't have much of an agenda. My goal is to tidy up the plants, but mostly I'm walking a little, observing, kneeling, digging, trimming, and clearing. It's leisurely. I have no big goals. Above me, the fir trees sway in the breeze. Birds tweet and swoop. Lilacs cast a sweet scent. The varying textures of leaves create a serene playscape. I don't have to turn on any devices or laptops. I don't have to read or speak as if I'm an intelligent human being. I don't have to scold or praise or form opinions or feel outraged. In fact, I don't have to have any thoughts or feelings at all. Instead, I just help small lives survive. My mind is quiet. Time is not important. I'm on vacation among those teeny—or giant, as it were—green miracles called plants.

## CREATING A VACATION DESTINATION FOR OTHERS

About twenty years ago, I decided to make a career out of “vacationing” with those green miracles. I fell in love with this one brilliant shrub (which I'll tell you about a little later) and never looked back. Since then, I discovered a recurring trend I couldn't shake.

First, let me tell you, during my years as a professional gardener, I did a lot of yucky stuff. I mean, do you know what's like when hemlock needles wedge in your undies? Not fun. Anyway, while working on clients' yards, I'd prune branches in the rain while





sawdust sprinkled my face. I'd crawl through mud to grab that last bit of morning glory vine. I'd clear brambles of blackberry whose thorny canes whapped my face. I even raked away leaves with my hands to be suddenly scared by a dead rat. (Thank God I had gloves on.) But the one thing that made up for my unfun troubles was the response I got from my clients like Dana.

Dana lived in a spacious cottage in a charming neighborhood of Seattle. She knew nothing about plants, and she didn't really care to find out (enter me, the gardener), but she knew she loved having a garden. In fact, before I started my work, she always gave me a quick tour of the beds to chat about how the plants were doing. We'd amble around the yard as she'd update me about how wonderful the "bush with the flat blue flowers" (hydrangea) was growing, and how the "purple leaf things" (coral bells) were her favorite, and how stumped she was about why the "pointy swords" (iris) were brown and, by the way, was brown bad? (answers: water and yes).

Every quarter, I maintained her yard and occasionally designed new perennial beds. The biggest area was a small courtyard in her backyard, not much more than a patio, containing a small Japanese maple and a shade border. Each time I finished up my work there, Dana came outside to check in. At nearly every meeting when she saw my progress, she'd squeal and jump up and down and clap her hands, a huge smile on her face. She loved the sight of her tidy garden. Her unguarded joy gave me joy.

Not all of my clients jumped and down about their gardens, although they too were often overjoyed after their garden had been tidied or installed. Lots of beaming smiles. Like Dana, most of my clients were not gardeners, not in the slightest. They were busy folks with more money than time. They were frequently stressed, working long hours in offices or whatnot, raising kids, struggling with a constant stream of tasks, relationships, and random thoughts. Uniformly, they all yearned for peace. So I saw my gardener job as designing and maintaining a sanctuary. In fact, a kind of sacred sanctuary. An outdoor space of interesting foliage, colorful flowers, and sweet scents. A place where they could relax and escape the overwhelming responsibilities of their lives. A place where they could breathe a sigh of relief, or "releaf" as it were.





And that's what they did. During follow-up maintenance or future project visits, clients often mentioned how their stress drastically lessened or even disappeared after spending time in the garden. Whether they were sitting, weeding, watering, puttering about, or even taking a phone call, they felt renewed and more peaceful. The garden actually evolved into their sanctuary, their special refuge where they healed from the stress of the day.

Again and again, I heard the phrases, "I can get away from the stress here," and "I feel so much better after we spend time out here."

One time, I asked a client, "Do you feel like you feel when you're on vacation?"

"Definitely," she said. "It's my happy place."

Happy place, indeed.

## YOUR "RELEAF" FROM STRESS



As the years went on, I sometimes wondered whether the mental health benefits of being among plants was limited to people who had a garden. I asked myself whether apartment dwellers could heal from their stress with either a small, or no, outdoor area. Was it possible to create a soothing green space indoors with houseplants? For those who were either physically unable or uninclined to grow plants, could they benefit by mimicking a green space, such as with photos and decor? Then, in recent years, I started reading the growing scientific research about the healing effects of nature, which gave me the answer to all of those questions: *yes*.

In a society growing quickly with technological advancements and whose citizens are squeezed by the responsibilities of careers, childrearing, elder caretaking, political polarization, and social media chatter, people struggle to stay happy. The pandemic has devastated families who lost loved ones. A weak economy has created severe financial distress. So many people, especially parents, lie in bed at night wondering if they can make ends meet before getting sucked into the whirlwind of the day, navigating commitments in a mostly indoor world of work, school, and home, where screens, not nature, dominate their lives.





Folks need a break from that whirlwind, a window of time when they can be idle to restore their energy and inspire inner harmony. And studies show that spending time with plants accelerates that soul-healing time. Nowadays, many people, especially millennials, appreciate nature and the importance of protecting our environment. People are ready, more than ever, to explore nature's happy-making effects. But oftentimes they don't know how. Or they may have tried to grow a few plants and weren't successful. Hence, that exploration gets shelved to an indefinite future to-do list.

Are you overwhelmed by the busyness of everyday life, or worried about illness, or do you find it hard to focus on the deep work of a job or hobby? Does social media pull you into its void of rumors, opinions, and shallow infotainment snippets? Do you feel like there's no time to relax?

If so, I think I can help you.

It entails, metaphorically, at least, stepping carefully down a new path, maneuvering over fallen logs, ducking under broken branches, and avoiding the prickly canes. But the risk will be worth it.

Though this book may not solve all of your problems, it can at least help you find some respite from the stress of the day. The early chapters focus on how to disengage from electronic screens and find more time in our busy lives. Then I share my concept of "green leisure," the method I've developed for dialing into nature's healing benefits. It involves seven basic destressing strategies rooted in scientific research. You'll hear stories from my life and from those of my clients and various friends. You'll learn about the amazing studies on the psychological benefits of plants and nature coming out of not just Japan and east Asia, but America, Europe, Australia, and India. I include some exploratory and quirky exercises I hope you have fun doing. Lastly, I wrap up with a section about how to make the best use of an indoor or outdoor space for a "green leisure lounge" before offering resources to further explore.

After reading, I hope you'll feel like you know how to reconnect with plants and nature to reduce stress and increase happiness in a way that's right for you. You may even become an expert at "leafing" your troubles behind!





## Part One



# DIGGING IN THE SOUL'S DIRT

To destress and grow happiness through plants, where do we begin? First, it's helpful to do a little soulful excavation in our lives. Unearth where we're at right now. What are our sources of stress and what changes could make our life better? Also, to what extent, if any, do we participate in the green world? And did we in the past but, for whatever reason, don't now? Regardless, solid research gives us some basic strategies for becoming happier and nature can fast-track those. We just need to dig around to discover what's right for us.

This section addresses our modern dilemma, green leisure, and one's green personality. We'll examine our indoor, tech-oriented, busy lives while covering how to disengage from technology, work less, and find more time. We discuss the concept of green leisure, my system for dialing into nature's healing benefits that's rooted in happiness research. Lastly, we assess what your green personality might be, your preferences as they relate to nature and what plant-oriented activities are right for you.





## Chapter One



# A Modern Dilemma of Our Own Making

*One of the things I missed most while living in space was being able to go outside and experience nature. After being confined to a small space for months, I actually started to crave nature—the color green, the smell of fresh dirt, and the feel of warm sun on my face. That flower experiment became more important to me than I could have ever imagined.—Scott Kelly, astronaut*

### LIVING LIFE IN A SMALL WHITE SCREEN

During the late 1990s, I discovered an important revelation about stress. At the time, I was intimately familiar with stress because of my job. I worked in tech as a content editor at an online retailer whose sales, reputation, and organization were exploding by the minute. Every day our stock price shot up, giving executives the justification to pressure employees into sixty-hour workweeks while human resources couldn't build teams fast enough to keep up with the work that needed covering. We had a charismatic, type-A CEO who often brainstormed ideas he wanted implemented in two days. In turn, everyone dropped what they were doing and scrambled in a different direction to jump on the



project, sacrificing what scant free evening time they had. Some employees even slept under their desks.

Feeling grateful that a young nobody English major like me had the opportunity to use my skills, I managed a mountain of work. I rendered website pages with complex technology that interacted with databases and hopefully didn't break pipelines. I assigned and edited content that existed only in a network of communicating packets. I wrote reviews, planned a schedule, and managed product information. Every day, the mail guy delivered a tower of boxes and envelopes to my desk. Every hour, dozens of emails jammed my inbox. The tasks flew in from all directions, at light speed and in an endless stream. All I did was react and execute. React and execute. React and execute.

And so I spent years tweaking with thousands of worries while staring at a small white screen. For around ten of my fifteen waking hours, my life was limited to the images and text inside that glowing fifteen-by-fifteen-inch panel. I sat in a scentless office under white fluorescent lights in a climate-controlled room with white walls. Sometimes I wore headphones playing white noise. Rarely did I go outside.

During the weekends, I had about thirty waking hours to decompress before jumping on the merry-go-round again, and, of course, half of that time was spent grocery shopping, taking care of family, walking the dog, running personal errands, and fixing home-related problems. My one highlight was sharing dinner or playing music with my husband. By the time I'd finally sorted through my feelings of anxiety and frustration and jettisoned some of my zig-zagging thoughts, it was already Sunday evening. So I struggled on, gaining thirty pounds of weight while losing hundreds of hours in happiness.

Sound familiar? You may not work in tech, but chances are good you spend most of your day staring at a screen for several hours. Chances are even better that you too feel anxiety and frustration and experience zig-zagging thoughts. If you're a parent, the stress is even greater.

How do I know? Well, in 2018 a Wrike poll found that 94 percent of Americans reported feeling stressed at their workplace, with nearly a third describing it as high to unsustainably high.<sup>1</sup> Around the same time, a Gallup poll found 51 percent of workers were “mentally checked out” while at work.<sup>2</sup> Generally, women are more stressed than men, according to the American Psychological Association, and younger people are more stressed than older folks.<sup>3</sup> In the end, stress is not only bad for our minds and bodies, it’s bad from a corporate perspective, too. Stanford researcher Leah Weiss found that chronic stress makes productive workplaces deteriorate. Employee engagement and morale nosedives. Ultimately, chronic stress leads to fatigue, anxiety, and confusion about “the setting of priorities.”<sup>4</sup>

I’ve been confused about my priorities, that’s for sure, which explains why I didn’t quit. We all need jobs, right? We have to put up with the bullcrap in order to get the paycheck. Admittedly, I got a decent paycheck at that job. So decent that my husband and I were able to buy a house. That house led me to my important revelation about stress.

### CAN ONE PLANT HEAL A SOUL?

As you might expect, the house came with a backyard. It was a pathetically brief plot of land, part neighbor’s garage, part rotting raised beds, all neglected with a scattering of shrubs and a sickly lawn. But I loved it; it was mine. And because it was mine, I wanted to care for it. But I didn’t know a cactus from a lamppost, so I started reading gardening magazines and books. I signed up for too many plant catalogs. At night, exhausted and in need of a refuge from corporate mania, I’d climb into bed with my stack of literature and peruse. I saw lovely photos of cheery plants: pointy hosta leaves, orange dahlias, gnarly redwoods. I read about their needs, their gifts. The ritual was a soothing salve for my angsty soul. I’d drift to sleep with images of green sanctuaries in my mind, a place



where no annoying colleagues or glitching software or soul-sucking rat race existed.

Then the turning point came. One night after my husband and I ripped out the rotted beds in the backyard and installed a fresh square of lawn, I got in the bathtub and soaked my sore muscles. With the idea of freshening up the yard with new plants, I scanned and dog-eared pages in a nursery catalog. Halfway in, my eyes landed on a butterfly bush. It was a perfectly rounded shrub covered in tubular violet flowers. The photo beamed with spots of dark purple and bright green. My eyes feasted on the beauty. It was called *Buddleia davidii* “Black Knight.” Above the plant’s description, a headline read: “Bring Butterflies to Your Garden!”

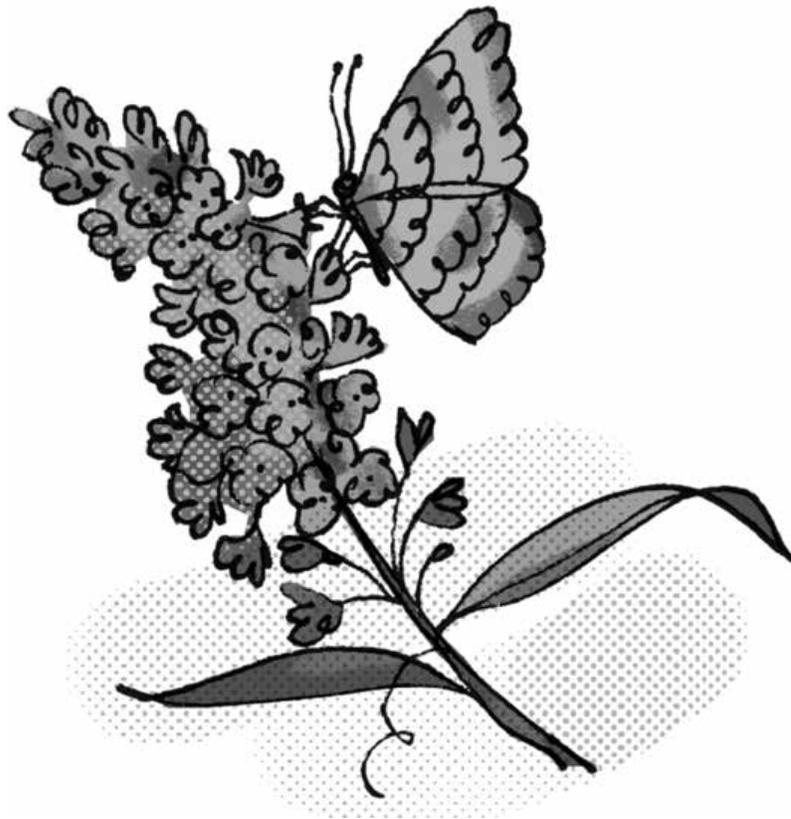
I blinked. I wanted to bring butterflies to my garden. Could that really happen? And how? How could a plant manipulate a butterfly? I had no idea. It seemed crazy. Didn’t butterflies just magically appear and fly around randomly, born to look pretty and remind people it was summer? Butterflies weren’t related to me or plants. They just did what they wanted to do whenever they felt like it.

Of course, now I know how wrong I was, but back then I didn’t. Reeling with the possibility that I might somehow make butterflies magically appear by simply planting a shrub, and in fact disbelieving that I could, I got up the next day and headed to a local nursery where I bought the alluringly named Black Knight. Convinced the advertising was overblown, I didn’t expect anything to happen, but the shrub with its grayish leaves and long indigo blooms stunned me. Its shape was so strange and cool. I couldn’t wait to see it grow into what the picture looked like.

You can guess that the plant didn’t exactly grow into a perfectly pruned, perfectly fertilized, perfectly rounded shrub. Instead, it was tall and gangly, and its flowers hung at weird angles like hoses. But the flowers—wow—they did sport that deep dark color. The purple moodily glowed against the crisp blue sky. When I looked closely at them, I noticed the blooms were actually a compendium of tiny flowers jammed in all directions along the stem. How did it do that? How did it know to create itself that way?



I never did figure out the long answer, but I did experience a different revelation: that butterfly bush, that one silly plant whose more common species relative, *Buddleia davidii*, is considered a weed in some states, completely neutralized my stress. Instantly—every day. In the morning before work, I gazed at its deep velvety flowers through the window while drinking tea, and in the evening, I checked on how it had changed. I liked to rub its fuzzy gray leaves, marveling at how prettily they contrasted against the glossy leaves of a nearby laurel. I enjoyed pulling out the hose and doing the simple act of watering before being surprised by fresh new growth a few days later. Most of all, I loved that, on a warm day in summer, a yellow and black swallowtail butterfly landed on that tubular flower, as promised.





When my attention focused on that plant, I didn't think about my job. I didn't think about anything office related at all: the convoluted meetings, the hundreds of emails, the mountain of work. No interpersonal politics, no complex technology, no messy responsibilities. It all melted away like magic. I felt as if I'd been taken out of a harsh, busy cage where I was swatted every day and gently laid in a peaceful, warm nest where I was not only *not* swatted but actually hugged.

Needless to say, I grew addicted to the feeling. Soon, I was outside in the sunlight (or, in Seattle's case, "cloudlight") almost every day. I planted more plants, playing and experimenting. I got exercise as I hauled pots around, dug holes, and took thousands of steps. Whatever my day had been like at the office, it mattered little, because as soon as I was immersed in my garden, I felt relaxed. I cared for innocent living things. I felt grateful for my teeny backyard. Even in winter when I wasn't outside much, I daydreamed and read about plants then designed and installed plans as the weather warmed. I met and had fun with other people who liked plants, too. In essence, I was practicing the essential strategies of destressing via the natural world. And little by little, my soul healed.

### **NATURE CALLED BUT WE WEREN'T HOME**

Perhaps you're working at a stressful office job as well. Maybe you have to work late on a project a coworker tossed in your lap, but you have to leave on time because your child needs a ride home from soccer practice. Or you should be answering your boss's email, but the cat vomited on the rug again. Your sister might need your ear to vent about her marriage, but you and your own spouse may be barely speaking. Maybe you're starving but forgot to hit the grocery store on the way home and have nothing but old ketchup in the fridge. Or perhaps money is a constant worry, or you or a loved one is suffering from a serious illness. What about laundry and dishes? There's always laundry and dishes. You may feel like *not* drinking an extra glass of wine or *not* watching another TV show is a win.



Getting a decent night's sleep is a flat-out triumph. Losing weight or volunteering or organizing the junk in the basement seems a million miles away.

Well, you're not alone.

The Happiness Research Institute in Denmark, founded by the ever handsome and seemingly placid Meik Wiking, says that although happiness is subjective, the institute has found some interesting, objective facts about it.<sup>5</sup> One of those is the surprisingly low rank of the United States when it comes to happiness. As of 2019, it was eighteenth, quite low considering our country's vast wealth.<sup>6</sup> It's not surprising that the institute cites stress as an enemy of well-being. And, of course, the 2020 pandemic didn't help, with parents, especially moms, carrying the brunt of the stress due to a weak economy and at-home schooling.

Meanwhile, we're spending more time than ever indoors. According to researcher Neil Klepeis, Americans spend 87 percent of their time indoors. The average American spends two hours and six minutes a day on social media. Twelve-year-olds spend about nineteen hours on electronic media a week.<sup>7</sup> That's a lot of life spent inside and stressed out!

In fact, journalist Richard Louv coined a term for the experience. It's not stuck-in-an-office-with-a-small-screen syndrome, though I suppose it could be. He calls it nature deficit disorder.<sup>8</sup> In his 2005 book, *Last Child in the Woods*, he found that behavioral problems and depression in children were often linked to their lack of time outdoors. Though his research applied to children, he later found the symptoms applied to adults as well. We've become stressed out from a fast-paced, indoor-based, technological world. We don't interact with nature like we used to, which has led to poor behavior and physical softness. We lack the sunlight we used to get working on farms and have developed vitamin D deficiencies. No wonder so many of us are depressed.

But the good news is plants can help.

In the last ten years, scientists have been proving that time spent in nature heals us. Both mentally *and* physically. We've learned about *shinrin-yoku* (or forest bathing) research from Japan;



how surgical recovery accelerates in hospital rooms with natural views; how taking in the scents, sights, and textures of plants lowers our heart rates and blood pressure. Green spaces make neighbors friendlier, and offices with plants increase worker productivity and improve attitudes.

In some ways, the idea isn't surprising, right? It makes sense. After all, nature was our first home on this planet. Plants give us life and air and food and beauty. We survived and evolved thanks to plants. In his 1984 book, E. O. Wilson popularized the concept of biophilia, the idea that humans possess an innate desire to connect with natural living systems.<sup>9</sup> Plants, forests, gardens, prairies, and landscapes are part of those. In short, we're biologically wired to crave nature (see Scott Kelly's thoughts in the chapter's opening quote).

What I unknowingly was doing with that butterfly bush is what researchers Stephen and Rachel Kaplan called attention restoration theory (ART).<sup>10</sup> In their studies, they found evidence that nature has the capacity to renew our attention after long bouts of exerting mental energy. You probably have already experienced ART. After a stressful busy week at work, you take a hike or camping trip in the woods on the weekend and afterward feel renewed. That's what vacations are for. But the Kaplans scientifically proved this feeling as it relates to plants. They also identified which natural interactions heal us best, along with the duration of the healing effects. In some ways, the healing effects have lasted for nearly my entire adult life, and I'll share what I've learned with you.

### **DOES NATURE *REALLY* HELP US RECOVER FROM STRESS?**

Most of us work hard. I mean, really, really hard. Whether we're burning the midnight oil on a complex work project, doing homework, caring for active children, or completing a difficult puzzle, that mental effort sucks away our energy and leaves us feeling wiped out. As we say, our brains "feel fried." We have to take a break.

Environmental psychology researchers Stephen and Rachel Kaplan thought that break was key, so they started studying natural environments



and whether they restored our ability to focus. For the last thirty years, the Kaplans have found nature is highly effective at healing our minds after intense stress. Whether we go on a camping trip or even watch nature scenery on a screen, we can recover via nature. They termed the phenomenon attention restoration theory (ART).

There are four components of effective attention restoration.

1. *Being away.* We have to remove ourselves from the usual work that's draining us. That can be physical (as in leaving the home, office, workplace, or classroom) or psychological. The point is to be psychologically detached or distracted from the source of stress.
2. *Soft fascination.* We need to be mildly fascinated by our surroundings. Interested but not highly stimulated or stressed by whatever we're looking at.
3. *Extent.* We need to be in a comfortable, familiar environment that's not jarring or surprising but one that encourages us to engage our minds without being disturbed or worried.
4. *Compatibility.* We need an environment we jibe with. One that's safe, congruent with what we know, enjoyable, easy to navigate, and not a place we feel obligated to visit.

They found that the natural environment provides these components more than any other. In fact, in an overview of the research on ART, Italian researcher Rita Berto found that engaging in nature produces positive mood changes, mediates negative effects of stress, has a restorative influence on disposition, and reduces anger and fear. People think better, are friendlier, more physically fit, and sociable. Those who spend time in nature experience reduced physiological symptoms of stress.<sup>11</sup> So, yes, nature really can heal us!

## BUT DO YOU HAVE TO GARDEN?

So am I saying everyone should buy a house and tend a garden and all will be well? No. There's no need for such drastic solutions. And nowadays, many people can't afford to buy a home. Others aren't interested in the headaches of maintaining one. A lot of people live in apartments by choice, and some folks are physically challenged, which puts gardening in a yard out of the question. Also, with prickly shrubs, uneven ground, and poisonous plants, nature can

be a bit treacherous. And let's face it, some of us don't want to get our hands dirty with mucky soil and creepy insects. All of that is valid. The good news is you don't need a garden. You just need the willingness to change your life a bit.

And how do we do that? Well, it's different for different people, but it's helpful to first assess our stress. If we can pinpoint from where our stress emanates, we can start taking small steps toward a happier, more relaxed life. Then we can explore the various strategies of destressing and how nature plays a part. And afterward, we might even figure out how to create a personal plant refuge, or what I call a green leisure lounge, like my client's "happy place" from the introduction. So I encourage you to do the following activities to start leafing your troubles behind. The first one is the easiest of all.



## ACTIVITIES

### Picturing a Happy Plant Place

**RATING:** Clean hands, no tools, indoors or outdoors, no cost

Here's an activity to remind you of what a happier, more relaxed life might feel like, a taste of what we're aiming for. You can do it anytime, anywhere: at home or at the office, school, library, or even while waiting for a table in a restaurant. I like to do this at home, right after lunch but before resuming work, to transition from active stuff to a calm feeling of restored relaxation.

1. Close your eyes and imagine you're in an outside "happy place" that's green with plants. It can be a beach, a wooded grove, a valley of wildflowers, a bench in a secret garden. Even your grandma's front porch. Wherever you are, it's the perfect day.
2. Take three deep breaths. Feel the sun's warmth on your face. Hear the wind rustling the leaves. The birds singing. Smell the fresh air, the moist soil, the sweet flowers. Take three deep breaths. Your

- hands rest against a smooth chair, or soft grass, or a velvety blanket. Notice the sun beaming through the trees, brightening the flowers, reflecting off the waves. Your heart beats in a steady quiet rhythm.
3. Breathe out the events of the day. Breathe out the tension. Let it drain from your face to your neck to your arms and torso and legs, straight out your toes. Inhale and exhale deeply, without thought. Let the stress go. You can think, “goodbye angst, hello peace.” Your body is serenely heavy; your heart beats slowly.
  4. Look at the beautiful natural surroundings. Breathe deeply again. Notice the sky, the leaves, the ground. If a random dark image enters the scene, silently say, “no, thank you.” Stay there for several more breaths. In fact, stay as long as you like. This is the happy plant place of your mind.
  5. When you’re ready, open your eyes. How do you feel? If you feel relaxed, more whole, better in any way, congrats! You’ve done the first step in destressing through nature. And remember, you can visit your happy plant place whenever you want.

### An Escape-to-Nature Notebook

**RATING: Clean hands, no tools, indoors, low cost (\$10–\$50)**

Creating this notebook is optional but worth it. I love mine. It’s a journal, an artistic outlet, and cheery reminder of possibilities. It provides a centralized location for all of your destressing work and fun, nature-related endeavors. Plus, it functions as a chronicle of your progress. You can use it well after you finish this book.

Make or buy a binder or scrapbook to hold all of your journal writings, diagrams, sketches, photos, pressed plant material, two-dimensional crafts, and calendar related to this journey. I include a list of supplies below but if you can’t afford them, download a mini-workbook from my website, [www.karenhugg.com](http://www.karenhugg.com). It has the pages you’ll need along with bonus information, photos, and additional activities.

*What you’ll need:*

- binder or scrapbook
- pockets or pocket folders



- lined paper
  - blank paper or sketch paper
  - stiff background paper
  - writing tool
  - photos of favorite plants from magazines or books (if you don't have favorites, refer to the activities in chapter 3)
  - calendar, either purchased or drawn, that fits in the pocket or three-ring binder
1. Write or draw "Escape to Nature" on the cover. If you're inclined, decorate it. You can write words or draw plant pictures or create a collage of photos, whatever you like.
  2. Insert your folder pockets. If you have pressed plants, put those in there.
  3. If you have favorite plants, like a collection of houseplants, take photos of them or use magazine photos to build a visual inventory on the stiff paper and write out the common and Latin names of the plant.
  4. Insert your calendar into the folder pocket or three-ring holder.
  5. Keep at the ready for future activities!

### **The Stress Bramble**

**RATING: Clean hands, no tools, indoors, low cost (\$0–\$10)**

Here's the first activity to put in your notebook: a "mind map" of the most tense, angsty aspects of your life. You'll draw a diagram of the sources of stress in your life by freely associating thoughts and feelings.

*What you'll need:*

- Escape-to-Nature notebook or blank paper
  - writing tool
1. In the center of the paper or notebook, write the word "stress" within a leaf shape (or circle).



2. Draw a stem, and in another leaf, write the first source of stress that pops into your head. Then draw another stem from the word “stress” and another source of stress inside another leaf. You might have listed “home” and “work.” If one of those words makes you think of a person or something related, create another small stem and leaf and write it down. As sources of stress and images come to you, write them in mini-lists or clustered. It’s up to you. Keep free associating thoughts and feelings. Work rapidly without much thinking. Let your stream of consciousness guide you. Keep clustering until you’ve poured all of the ways that life stresses you out on the paper. Include everything until you have a giant bramble of stress.
3. Circle or highlight the worst offenders. Notice where there are clusters. Wherever you notice a large cluster, you’ll discover a “hot zone” of stress.

Keep it handy. We’ll examine this bramble in the next chapter.