

## How Nature Affects Our Health

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#### Your Health

By Deborah Franklin

#### Inviting the Outdoors In

*Research shows that regular contact with nature boosts physical and mental health as well as productivity; with a little imagination, even people who are stuck inside can reap these benefits*

**AFTER ENDURING** one of the wettest winters in Seattle history, Judith Heerwagen, an environmental psychologist and a great believer in the power of nature to restore a weary soul, had to admit last February that 33 straight days of rain had been enough to swamp even her enthusiasm for the great outdoors.

"It got to be pretty grim," Heerwagen recalls. Day after day, her usually splendid window views of trees and a leafy garden were a soupy, storm-battered mess. "Still," she insists, "I'd much rather have a window view of constant rain than no window at all."

And, apparently, so would the rest of us. In the two decades since Harvard University biologist E.O. Wilson first suggested that fascination with nature might be hardwired into the human brain, health researchers and psychologists such as Heerwagen have amassed significant evidence that he was right.

The powerful affinity that Wilson and others have named "biophilia" is more than just puppy love. In hospital studies, Texas A&M University psychologist Roger Ulrich found that surgical patients randomly assigned to a room with a window view of trees not only required less pain medication, but also healed faster and were discharged more quickly than if they had no window or had a view of a brick wall.

Tapping into the power of biophilia may also boost a company's bottom line. In Heerwagen's own research, Michigan office and factory workers were both happier with their work environment and 20 percent more productive after their firm moved into a building that had skylights and windows that opened onto views of restored prairie with meandering footpaths and wetlands rather than sterile, office park surroundings.

"Instead of the big expanse of a clipped lawn and staid fountain that you usually find at a corporate headquarters, this large furniture manufacturer, Herman Miller, put in a pond and restored acres of prairie around the building with huge windows looking out from the factory showroom," Heerwagen says. "The building is still just off the highway, and it's noisy from the manufacturing, but the workers can look outside and see great blue herons in the pond."

In ongoing efforts to tease out what it is about some landscapes that makes them particularly appealing, researchers have discovered through cross-cultural studies

that certain features—the broad, spreading canopies of clustered trees, colorful flowers or sparkling water, for example—are pleasing to people throughout the world. “People are aesthetically drawn to environmental features that have proven instrumental to human survival,” writes Yale University social ecologist Stephen Kellert in his 2005 book *Building for Life: Designing and Understanding the Human-Nature Connection*. Such features, Kellert continues, include “clean flowing water, promontories that foster sight and mobility, areas that offer refuge and shelter, and bright flowering colors that frequently signify the presence of food.” The premium price that people are willing to pay for mountain or water views in hotels or homes provide further anecdotal evidence, he says.

But you don’t need a big budget or floor-to-ceiling windows to bring the benefits of the outdoors in. With a little creativity, even worker bees toiling in windowless cubicles or residents of basement apartments can strengthen their healing connections to the outside world. To see for yourself, try these biophilia-based home decorating tips:

**Value the vista:** No window? No problem. Though nothing can truly replace the sounds, fragrances, fresh air and stimulation we get through genuine windows overlooking a glorious nature scene, we can’t all live and work in Yosemite. If you don’t have an actual view of the horizon, put up photographs, paintings, nature calendars or even postcards that simulate a long view of sky and earth.

**Let there be light:** Studies of office workers show that it’s not just being able to see outside that they crave, it’s also the movement of air and, especially, the shifting patterns of light that signal changes in the time of day and season. Access to daylight, where possible, or glowing or dappled light from track lights or sconces that scatter light against a wall can lift mood and productivity. Improved lighting need not cost more; research shows that energy-saving fluorescent bulbs can be just as effective, if properly deployed.

**Plant a posy:** Houseplants and window boxes of fragrant herbs or flowers literally add life to a room. Watching potted plants grow from tender shoots to pie-ready strawberries or succulent tomatoes may be a particularly sweet way to have your nature and eat it, too. Warning: Toss cut flowers before they wither and smell, and also get rid of what Heerwagen calls “prisoner plants”—the lone, spindly, leafless specimens huddling in a too-small pot in a dark corner. “Live plants and flowers are comforting,” she says. “Dead ones don’t make anyone feel better.”

**Play with color:** Even a single fresh bloom can add inexpensive delight to a table or desk, and that makes sense evolutionarily: In the wild, flowers are soon followed by fruit. Visit a farmer’s market for local blooms. Exotic choices can be attractive, Kellert says, but the familiar flowers closer to home will likely strike a deeper emotional chord.

**Talk to the animals:** Research has repeatedly shown that friendly interaction with animals can ease depression, reduce blood pressure, and otherwise buffer stress and boost self-esteem. No time or space for pets? Put a hummingbird feeder outside your window or offer to walk or play ball with a neighbor’s dog.

**Sway with the seasons:** No matter how many hours you spend in a virtual world, each physical locale has distinctive scents and sounds that shift with the seasons.

Taking note of the seasonal clues in your neighborhood and incorporating some into your decor—a blooming cactus, a rosy branch of redbud—can help ground you in place and time. Fragrant plants—lilac or lavender in spring or summer, say, or rosemary or pine in December—are especially evocative.

**Hide when you need to:** Biophilia isn't just a love of pleasant nature; it's also about feeling safe from danger. Peripheral gloom can feel threatening even when no danger lurks; drawing the shades across windows at night, or adding standing, light-colored screens around a conversation area, can lend coziness to an exposed space.

**Walk in the park:** Make spending time outdoors a priority. In studies of college students by Uppsala University psychologist Terry Hartig, those who spent 40 minutes walking through a park were more accurate in subsequent proofreading tests and much more likely to say they felt refreshed than those who spent 40 minutes strolling through city streets or those who sat quietly inside reading or listening to music. Such findings would not have surprised 19th century American naturalist Henry David Thoreau, who advised a daily walk "to re-ally ourselves with nature."

The next step in architecture and other forms of design, Kellert says, is to more fully integrate the principles of biophilia into notions of "sustainable" technology. "I've started thinking of it as 'restorative environmental design'—a concept that incorporates all those principles," he says. "It can't just be about avoiding having negative effects on the environment. We need to think about taking advantage of nature's benefits, too."

*California journalist Deborah Franklin wrote about ways to save energy during the holidays in the December/January issue.*

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