

Tending Your Inner Garden®

Time in Nature as a Spiritual Practice

Nature reminds us that we share the gift of life with the cardinal in our backyard, the towering Scotch pine, the tall grass on the prairie and the dolphin in coastal waters. We may attribute this life to a Creator and find spiritual significance in our interconnectedness with all life forms. Or we may recognize a life force at work in the universe and reflect on its mysterious source. In either case, by observing and appreciating nature, we are invited to experience ourselves in a new way. By watching a bird picking berries off a bush, a tree sway in the wind, or a stream ripple over smooth rocks, we temporarily put to rest our rational mind, which is always seeking to analyze and conquer the external world.

REASONS FOR SPENDING TIME IN NATURE Nature helps us be in the present moment, opening up our awareness to whatever thoughts, emotions or ideas might emerge. By watching nature over the seasons, we learn about how things change—how they begin, transform and end—providing a guide to our own process of changing internally and externally. Studies have shown that observing nature for even a few moments can help people heal faster, relieve daily stress, and make better decisions.

To use interactions with nature as a spiritual practice or an opportunity to open up to the mysteries of life, consider several approaches to fully experiencing the world around you.

Walking Meditation. Many of us enjoy walking as a way to exercise and spend time with a friend or family member. Walking, if done meditatively, can be helpful in developing your intuitive self. Do walking meditation alone or with a companion who shares your interest in stillness. Find a place to walk that you find comforting or inspiring. Initially, simply note your feet touching the ground. Does your heel touch first? Do your toes touch the earth? How solid do your feet feel on the ground? Note how your feet feel in your shoes, how sensations change when you walk on concrete or on the earth, how your mood shifts if you have a destination in mind or are simply wandering. Slow up your pace so that you can pay attention to these sensations.

On one of your walks, decide in advance to note something in particular. Look at everything that's red. Or everything that moves. Or everything that makes a noise.

Use walking meditation as a way to express gratitude. Thank the earth that holds you up. Imagine the energy of your feet flowing down to the core of the earth and the energy from the earth flowing up your feet and into your body. Be thankful you can walk.

Sacred Places. Find a place you can go to regularly to rest and observe. This place may already exist, ready for you to enjoy. Or you may create it by arranging plants, a bench, and some object of significance. Meditate here, using the skills you've developed. Ask a

question. Listen for what comes up. By combining meditation with nature, your intuitive self is likely to open up and provide guidance.

Experience your sacred place at different times of the day. The Chinese believe that the earth's energy is especially powerful just before sunrise. Do you feel a difference at that hour?

As you travel, note the special gifts offered by the landscape. Rivers remind us that life flows; we cannot halt it without creating stagnant waters. Oceans remind us of the depth of our life experience and invite us to go down into our most basic yearnings.

Trees teach us the value of deep roots. They provide shade, recreation, shelter, beauty. They encourage us to stretch upward to receive the warmth and power of the sun. Mountains exist before we are born and after we die. They remind us that our lives are part of an eternity that has no discernible beginning and end.

Contemplate on what various aspects of nature mean to you and record them in your journal.

Mindfulness. Nature can wake us up from the trance we all tend to fall into as we live our daily lives. We stop marveling at that brilliant yellow of the Goldfinch or the scarlet red of the Cardinal. We fail to take pleasure in how peaceful our cat appears stretched out, napping in the sun coming through the window. We drive by the old magnolia tree every day, not wondering why all its branches point to the north. Study some small thing for 15 or 20 minutes. Notice everything about it. If you wake up to a bird or a tree, you'll also start waking up to your life in a new way.

Involvement. When we increase our appreciation for nature, we also become aware of how it is being damaged. That precious stream you sit by may not always be clean. That bird species you love may cease to exist. Those open fields may be covered by concrete. Consider how you can join with others in protecting our environment.

What other ideas do you have for using nature as a source of insight and inspiration?

