



Back to the Garden



Walter McKenzie for xSEleratED

“The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and the heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

[Nature: Ralph Waldo Emerson's Philosophical Reflections on the Natural World](#)

Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1836

May is the culmination of a school year's work, as classrooms mature into cohesive learning communities with students and teachers alike appreciating how far they have come collectively and on their individual journeys. It's not quite June yet; there's still valuable time left to go. Yet the bulk of the heavy lifting, from learning to assessments, is behind us. This, in combination with the glorious weather just outside school windows, creates opportunities for reconnection to the natural world.



Wellness and Mental Health Benefits

Plato may have coined the notion of “man the city-builder,” but as society has created the megalopolis phenomenon, our well-being pulls us back to the garden. Reconnecting with the natural world helps us recharge by actively lowering physiological stress markers and restoring cognitive energy, realigning our minds, bodies and spirits with the natural pulse and rhythm of life sans targets and deadlines. Nature facilitates a mental reset through three primary scientific pathways:

- **Attention Restoration:** Unlike urban environments that "snatch" your focus with loud noises and screens, nature provides "soft fascination"—gentle stimuli like rustling leaves or moving clouds that allow your brain's concentration systems to rest and recover.
- **Biochemical Shifts:** Exposure to sunlight triggers the release of serotonin and Vitamin D, which naturally boost mood, focus, and energy.
- **Heart rate and blood pressure while activating the parasympathetic nervous system, responsible for relaxation. Physiological Calm:** Being in green or "blue" (water-based) spaces lowers he

Nature provides "soft fascination"—stimuli like rustling leaves that capture attention without demanding effort. This allows the brain's directed attention system to rest, improving focus and problem-solving. Spending as little as 20 minutes in nature significantly lowers cortisol (the body's primary stress hormone), heart rate, and blood pressure, and exposure to natural environments is linked to increased levels of serotonin and dopamine, which boost happiness and reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. Moreover, daily exposure to natural light helps regulate circadian rhythms, improving sleep quality and daytime alertness.

The vastness of the natural world can induce feelings of awe, helping us feel part of something larger than themselves. This can decrease feelings of isolation and increase empathy and prosocial behaviors. Exposure to nature alters activity in the prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for regulating emotions, leading to a more balanced emotional state. It promotes healthy emotional regulation strategies, such as mindfulness and cognitive reappraisal, while decreasing maladaptive ones like rumination and worry. Natural settings are excellent places to self-repair and manage emotional distress.

To reap the benefits of connection to the natural world, aim for at least an hour a week in nature, achieved in a single session or spread across smaller daily breaks. Actively notice nature by listening to birdsong, smelling flowers, or practicing "earthing" (physically touching grass, rocks, or soil). If wild spaces are unavailable, urban parks, garden tending, and even indoor plants or viewing nature scenes through a window can provide meaningful mental health perks.

The Education Connection

In [The Way to Pancho's Kitchen](#) (The Worthy Educator Press, 2026), Stuart Grauer expounds on the significance of the natural world both in how we lead in schools and how we nurture ourselves in our personal lives.

“Unlike thresholds or hearths, [the outdoors] offer no invitation, no schedule, no program. Students do not pass through it on their way to something else; they linger, wander, disappear briefly, and return changed. In architectural terms, it is negative space; in human terms, it represents restraint, sacrifice, and a place where the subconscious can do its work. In educational terms, it teaches by simply making space for sensitivity to the natural world. This archetype does not produce outcomes; it creates conditions.” (Grauer, p. 176) We spend so much time with our learners inside in intensive instructional work, but it’s May, and there’s still time to bring the children in our charge full circle back to the world outside our walls and windows. Stuart continues to make his case for this throughout his refreshing look at the future of education: “Human-scale learning, environmental responsibility, and a meaningful spiritual connection to the local, natural world are not add-ons; they are the essence of sustainability itself.” (Grauer, p. 220).

Getting kids outside isn't just about burning off energy; it fundamentally changes how they experience the world. They observe life cycles in a garden, calculate the height of a tree, or learn physics by building a dam in a creek. It turns abstract concepts into tangible reality.

Studies show that spending time in green spaces reduces "mental fatigue" and improves attention spans, as they learn their own physical limits and explore the possibilities for learning and adventure. For children who struggle with the sensory overload of a traditional classroom (bright lights, loud hallways), the natural world provides a "sensory neutral" space that makes it easier to process emotions and social interactions. The natural world activates biological, cognitive, and sensory pathways that foster restoration and balance beyond the classroom.

Looking for ways to queue in your students to the experience they anticipate going outdoors? Try guided breathing before you go, framing the outdoor time as an intentional wellness practice rather than a break from learning. Guided breathing techniques include Five Finger Breathing (tracing fingers while breathing), Belly Breathing (using hands to feel abdominal movement), Box Breathing (4-second intervals), and imaginative breathing (e.g., imagining a balloon rising or a feather floating midair).

Then, while outdoors, ask students to notice 5 things they see, 4 things they feel, 3 things they hear, 2 things they smell, and 1 thing they can touch. Pairing this with deep, slow belly breathing helps them to be in the moment, fully present and experiencing their surroundings. It allows children to shift focus away from the cares of their day by training the mind to focus on specific, tangible details, promoting a notice-and-describe mindset rather than an overthinking or ruminating one, so that they experience awareness of their immediate physical and emotional experiences.

Making time to experience nature promotes mental well-being by leveraging natural environments to lower stress hormones, providing spaces for emotional recovery through sensory engagement, and building agency through self-directed, challenging activities. By combining physical activity with nature immersion, these programs help regulate the nervous system, foster resilience, and increase student self-confidence.



“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.”

-Henry David Thoreau

[Walden; or Life in the Woods](#)

Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854

Free and Easy

Whether you go yourself, with colleagues, or on a class trip, we all have venues right in our local communities that connect us to the natural world:

- Parks adorned with walking trails, picnic tables and open air even within busy communities
- Ponds nestled in secluded areas away from human activity where the world seems still
- River Banks where the land meets dancing waters reflecting sunlight and the sounds of water lapping up against the earth
- Lakeshores that reveal an open expanse of water surrounded by tree-lined shores while the sounds of nature abound
- Beaches with the sound of the surf and the briny salt air filling and then relaxing our senses
- Woods right in our neighborhoods that provide an immediate sanctuary for exhaling, relaxing, and regaining perspective
- Forests providing a home to local wildlife and a variety of trees and vegetation that stand as a testament to the timeless truths of nature

- Meadows rolling across flatlands, hills and slopes with tall grasses and occasional trees and brush gracefully moving with the breeze
- Paths and Trails created to guide walkers and hikers through natural areas and historic places reserved for our enjoyment
- Gardens like arboretums and botanical, sculpture, memorial and community gardens developed and tended to for the community
- Nature Reserves designated to protect and preserve tracts of land and species that might be otherwise encroached upon by human development

No matter where we are situated on this earth, there are a variety of ways to connect with nearby nature, disconnect from the bustle and hum of our manmade environs, feel the sun on our face, the breeze in our hair, and the sense of oneness with the world.

Whether you're up for a school day field trip, or you just invite students and their families to join you on a day off of school, nature-based activities can be tailored to match children's stages of development, moving from pure sensory exploration for our youngest learners to complex scientific inquiry for young adults.

You don't need a deep wilderness expedition; local green spaces are highly effective for a quick refresh. Consider these activities and the wellness and social-emotional benefits provided in parentheses:

- *Mindfulness & Forest Bathing: (intentionality and self-awareness) Immerse yourself in a local park or trail using all five senses—listen to birds, feel the bark of a tree, or smell the fresh air. This practice, known as Shinrin-yoku, is proven to improve immune function and reduce anxiety.*
- *Green Exercise: (release and relaxation) Spend time near a lake, river, or ocean. It induces a mildly meditative state that soothes the nervous system and eases mental tension.*
- *Blue Mind Effect: (the mind-body connection) Take a brisk walk, go for a bike ride, or practice yoga in a park. Movement in nature releases endorphins and boosts self-esteem more effectively than indoor workouts.*
- *Creative Engagement: (personal expression and connecting to larger truths) Try nature painting, photography, journaling, or gardening. These hobbies provide a sense of accomplishment and purpose, helping you disconnect from digital demands. Creative Engagement*

And, of course, for any of these activities, leave your phone behind or on silent to fully benefit from the mental break.

For young children, nature is a sensory celebration, offering opportunities to build fine and gross motor skills through Full-body exploration:

- ***Sensory Walks:*** (experiencing surroundings through our bodies) Walk barefoot on different surfaces like grass, sand, and smooth stones to discuss textures and temperatures
- ***Nature Sorting:*** (agency over our surroundings) Collect natural items like rocks, leaves, or pine cones and sort them by color, size, or shape to introduce early math and science concepts
- ***Animal Mimicry:*** (empathy for living things) Encourage kids to hop like frogs, waddle like ducks, or crawl like bears to develop balance and imagination
- ***Hide and Seek:*** (group trust and emotional safety) Identify a small, defined area and make the most of trees and brush for hiding and finding one another

For elementary-age children, provide experiences in ecological cycles and basic scientific methods through hands-on projects:

- ***Nature Journaling:*** (self-awareness and reflection) Give them a sketchbook to draw and label specific birds, insects, or plants they find. This sharpens observation skills and vocabulary
- ***Backyard Scavenger Hunts:*** (awareness of self and others) Create checklists for items with specific criteria, such as "a perfectly symmetrical leaf" or "something older than you," to combine movement with critical thinking
- ***Homemade Bird Feeders:*** (stewardship of our environment) Build simple feeders using pine cones, peanut butter, and seeds. This fosters responsibility and empathy for local wildlife
- ***Shadow Tracking:*** (perception and perspective) Use chalk, string or camera shots to outline an object's shadow and observe how it changes at different times of the day

Older children can immerse themselves in activities where their observations and data collection contribute to real global understanding:

- **Tree Trigonometry:** (self-perception and relationship to nature) Use the ratio of a student's height to their shadow to calculate the height of a tall tree, applying geometry in a real-world setting
- **Web of Life:** (interdependence and perspective) Use a ball of yarn in a group to connect "species" (students) based on their food sources, then "remove" one species to see how the whole web collapses
- **Citizen Science Projects:** (engagement with the community and nature) Use apps like [iNaturalist](#) or [eBird](#) to document local biodiversity. Their photos help researchers track species populations
- **Environmental Engineering:** (making a difference through ingenuity) Challenge them to build a working water filtration system using sand, charcoal, and rocks, or a solar oven from a pizza box

“A child’s world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantment of later years ... the alienation from the sources of our strength.”

-Rachel Carson
[The Sense of Wonder](#)
New York: Harper & Row, 1965



Far and Away

Beyond your local community context, consider the natural world in the larger region surrounding you. For example, top-tier state parks offer serene landscapes and recreation within driving distance. While these excellent examples may not be in your region, rest assured you have your own versions of these wonderful showcases of the natural world:

- [Watkins Glen State Park](#) in New York is famous for 19 waterfalls within a two-mile gorge trail, consistently ranked among the most popular and scenic in the U.S.
- [Fall Creek Falls State Park](#) in Tennessee features one of the highest waterfalls in the eastern U.S. and massive recreational opportunities
- [Valley of Fire State Park](#) in Nevada is known for 40,000 acres of Aztec sandstone and petrified trees in the Mojave Desert
- [Petit Jean State Park](#) in Arkansas situated next to the Arkansas River between the Ouachita Mountains and the Ozark Plateaus
- [Anza-Borrego Desert State Park](#) in California: California's largest state park, offering vast, remote desert landscapes and solitude

- [Itasca State Park](#) in Minnesota is the states oldest park, serving as the headwaters of the Mississippi River
- [Ecola State Park](#) in Oregon is known for its for spectacular cliffs and rainforests
- [Ha Ha Tonka State Park](#) in Missouri encompasses 3,751 acres of the Niangua arm of the Lake of the Ozarks
- [First Landing State Park](#) in Virginia offers a variety of waterfront scenery and walkways
- [Hocking Hills State Park](#) in Ohio offers breathtaking rock formations and plenty of hiking options from a very easy 1/4 mile trail to trail hikes of many miles
- [Ricketts Glen State Park](#) in Pennsylvania offers twenty-two waterfalls along a single trailway
- [Bear Brook State Park](#) in New Hampshire is the largest developed state park, featuring swimming, fishing, and hiking, boasting over 10,000 acres
- [Kodachrome Basin State Park](#) in Utah showcases its prehistoric "sand pipes" for your enjoyment

Want to explore more undiscovered state park treasures? See [The 36 Best State Parks in America](#) and Wikipedia's comprehensive [Lists of State Parks by U.S. State](#) to zoom in on your state.

National parks preserve pristine, biodiverse landscapes ranging from forests to deserts, providing immersive outdoor experiences that promote mental health, lower stress, and a deep appreciation for the environment. Again, these examples may or may not be within driving distance for you, but there are more out there for you to consider:

- [Saguaro National Park, Arizona](#): Protects the giant saguaro cacti (the nation's largest cacti) within the spectacular Sonoran Desert
- [Isle Royale National Park, Michigan](#): An island wilderness in Lake Superior accessible by boat or seaplane, known for hiking and Northern Lights viewing

- [New River Gorge National Park and Preserve, West Virginia](#): Protects and maintains the breathtaking New River Gorge in the Appalachian Mountains
- [North Cascades National Park, Washington](#): Rugged, alpine landscape with jagged peaks and glaciers, offering intense hiking without the crowds
- [Saugus Iron Works National Historic Site, Massachusetts](#): Twelve-acres featuring working waterwheels, forges, a rolling mill, all set along the Saugus River
- [Castillo de San Marcos National Monument, Florida](#): Preserves the oldest fortification in the continental U.S. with more than 450 years of history
- [Theodore Roosevelt National Park, North Dakota](#): One of the less-visited national parks, it is located in the badlands of western North Dakota
- [Acadia National Park, Maine](#): Primarily on Mount Desert Island with a landscape consisting of woodlands, rocky beaches and glacier-scoured granite peaks
- [Congaree National Park, South Carolina](#): Protects the largest intact expanse of old-growth bottomland hardwood forest in the Southeast
- [Kobuk Valley National Park, Alaska](#): As the least-visited national park, it features the Great Kobuk Sand Dunes and arctic caribou migrations.
- [Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia Borders](#): Offering historical trails, scenic mountain views and lush waterways
- [Craters of the Moon National Monument & Preserve, Idaho](#): A volcanic landscape with lava flows and cinder cones.
- [Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Texas](#): Home to the highest peak in Texas, offering canyons, desert wilderness and impressive mountain views

These parks offer unique, often secluded, opportunities to experience nature without the massive crowds found at more popular destinations. Want to find national parks near you? See the National Park Service's Find a Park site.

There is no shortage of the natural world to enjoy, from right outside your door to clear across the country. We wish you wonderful respites and memory-making taking in breathtaking views, plenty of fresh, invigorating air, and a reset of all the invincible seasons within you!

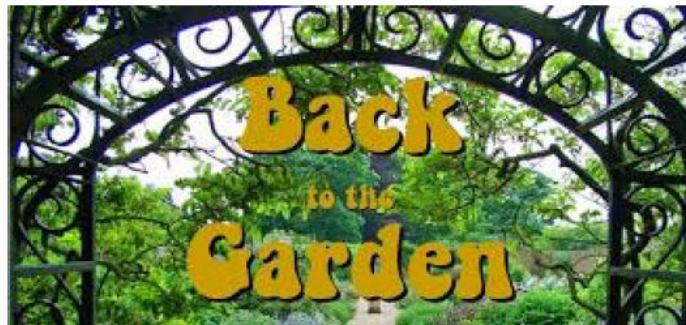
"Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves."

-John Muir

[Our National Parks](#)

Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1901

Your xSEleratED May Bonus Resource!



May Bonus Resource

An outdoor scavenger hunt is a versatile game where participants find specific items from a list or solve clues to progress. It encourages **grounding in nature, observation skills, physical activity** and **relaxation** and a **reset** from everyday classroom routines.

Which of these ideas might be best suited for your students?

- ✓ **Nature Collection Hunt:** Use an egg carton and collect 12 different items found on the hunt (e.g. feathers, leaves, rocks, sticks, pinecones, flowers, and other unique finds).
- ✓ **Color/Rainbow Hunt:** Look for items in nature that correspond to every color of the rainbow, or specific colors of your choice (e.g., something green, blue, yellow, purple).
- ✓ **Texture/Sensory Hunt:** Be on the lookout for items that are fuzzy, sharp, smooth, or rough and name or collect them individually or in teams.