

Into the woods

Despite its name, forest bathing isn't about getting wet. Instead the experience involves using all your senses to immerse yourself in nature. Teacher Susanne Meis explores its transformative effects

I remember my first time. After a hectic morning, I arrived in the woods feeling tense and a little nervous about trying something new with a group of strangers. But I could not have imagined the surprising effects forest bathing would have on me. My entire being felt relaxed. There was an absolute absence of tension in my body and mind. The constant mind chatter had vanished.

Three months later, I began to train as a guide with The Forest Bathing Institute. Since then, I have seen hundreds of people across the UK effortlessly and joyfully recover mental, emotional and physical energy with forest bathing. In these times of desperate need for mind-body-resilience, I cannot think of a better way to support both inner and outer strength.

Forest bathing was first introduced as a preventative healthcare practice in 1982 in Japan, part of a national health programme. *Shinrin-yoku* means to bathe in the atmosphere of the forest. Global interest continues to grow, and research shows numerous benefits. The Forest Bathing Institute recorded 12 areas of wellbeing improvement, including alleviating depression and tension.

TAKING IT SLOW

In essence, forest bathing is a slow, sensory woodland walk. We intentionally spend quality time under the canopy of trees, which feels different to a common walk in the woods. When we walk at our usual pace, talk to a friend, use our phone or have a destination in mind, nature becomes a backdrop. At a lecture at Kew Gardens, Peter Wohlleben, forester and author of *The Hidden Life of Trees*, said: 'We have forgotten how to be in nature.' Forest bathing is a beautiful way to remember. It invites us to perceive our environment directly through our senses and experience it in new,

Natural therapy:
a forest bathing
session at Kew

Photo: Alec Riches

‘Amid trees, we are surrounded by many therapeutic forces at once... Natural colours, shapes and sounds help us relax’

Forest bathing guide and teacher
Susanne Meis at Kew

meaningful ways. We immerse ourselves and deepen our connection with nature.

There are no fixed rules for forest bathing on your own. Turn your phone off and go to a place with trees you enjoy. It can be a garden, park or woodland where you feel comfortable and safe. Give yourself the gift of silence... Walk slowly, breathing in and out through your nose... Let nature lead. Allow her to entice your eyes, ears and nose... Pause and take your time to touch and observe what you feel drawn to.

It might not always feel easy to open our senses. Our minds are prone to rumination. So the gentle guidance of a forest bathing expert is often helpful – with a little patience we can usually reawaken dormant senses.

A THERAPEUTIC SPACE

Kew ambassador Dame Judi Dench says: ‘As humans, we have such a deep connection to trees and woodland and forest bathing allows you to focus on that connection, engaging all your senses.’

Our eyes thrive when allowed to roam far, wander wide and feast on fractal patterns like the branches of a tree. In nature, our overexerted eyes can recover from prolonged two-dimensional, close-range screen time. We can absorb the natural light our body needs to sleep, wake, digest and so much more.

Amid trees, we are surrounded by many therapeutic forces at once, such as aromatherapy, colour therapy and sound therapy. Japanese research found that phytoncides in the forest air can strengthen our immune defence. Natural colours, shapes and sounds help us relax and access the self-healing wing of our autonomic nervous system – our parasympathetic nervous system. From there we can more easily tap into our higher brain function, intuition and heart intelligence. Participants share that they gained new insights and feel more connected and creative after forest bathing.

Emotionally, a wooded area can be one of the fastest and most effective mood boosters.

We may feel preoccupied until we stumble across the most stunning moss. Beauty can jolt us straight into elation and help transcend fear. A natural scent may instantly take us back to playing outdoors when we were younger. The sense of smell is part of the limbic system, the area of our brain responsible for emotions and memories. When was the last time you smelled the aromatic spice of an oak leaf or the rich fragrance layers in a handful of soil?

Mentally, a forest invites a relaxed fascination, which recovers our ability to focus. Witnessing nature’s diversity can also lead to more self-acceptance. Trees come in all shapes and sizes and don’t care how beautiful or smart we are.

SEEING KEW WITH NEW EYES

At Kew, we are blessed with a beauty banquet. Lose your map and yourself under evergreen and deciduous canopies. See your favourite trees with forest bathing eyes and be open to the rapture of new, unexpected beauty, like the otherworldly lichen and moss on the dainty bent apple tree at Queen Charlotte’s Cottage, or the sumptuous scent of soil in the small yew grove across the Woodland Glade. Smelling the chocolate-vanilla aroma of box-leaf azara (*Azara microphylla*) flowers, I was happy. There will always be trees that warm our heart and take our breath away like the majestic red oak (*Quercus rubra*).

Even though many people have profound experiences the first time they try forest bathing, those who go regularly may see true transformation. As our perception and awareness grows, we become kinder and stronger versions of ourselves. For a full heart and empty mind, the first step is to come and see, hear, smell, touch and experience forest bathing for yourself.

Susanne Meis is a guide and teacher at The Forest Bathing Institute (www.tfb.institute). She will be leading forest bathing events at Kew Gardens, as part of a programme of wellness-related activities this spring. Please check kew.org for further details.



Try these forest bathing techniques

Fractal tracing

From a comfortable distance, loosely follow the shape of a tree with relaxed eyes from trunk to larger and finer branches before enjoying the whole shape of the tree.

Wind/sun massage

Bring awareness to the surface of your skin. Feel where the wind/sun touches you. Turn slowly and feel the wind/sun in different places.

Proprioception & perspective

Sense the vast space of the sky above your head. Perceive the safe, weightless blanket of a tree canopy. Crouch or sit down and experience the world like a smaller animal.

Fingertip touch

With open eyes, imagine the texture of a specific tree or natural object. Close your eyes and gently explore the object with your fingertips.

Colour therapy

Spot a colour you love and imagine absorbing its positive qualities. Notice a less favourite colour and observe its natural beauty and value.