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Exploring Through Nature



Flee to the Wilderness.
The one within, if you
can find it.

—Utah Philips

There's no greater source of creative inspiration, beauty, and art than the planet we live on. Nearly every artist will tell you that they draw great inspiration from the natural world—from the beauty in the falling leaves of a forest to the way a child's toes dig into the sand. As adults, many of our favorite childhood memories are connected with spots in nature—a walk in the woods behind Grandma's house, a neighborhood tree we climbed often, or a tree house we escaped to. Nature can be both our inspiration and our meditation. It can be a way that we connect with the earth and ourselves and, through that, find our creative spirits and energy.

I don't think there is anything more beautiful or inspiring to me

than watching children just be in nature. When they are able to be free in their environment—free in mind and free in spirit—their inherent sense of connection to the earth is strong and alive. As a parent, I feel blessed and inspired to watch this process unfold throughout their childhoods.

It is important not only to spend time outdoors, but to bring the outside in as well. The things we surround ourselves with have a great impact on how we view our world. This is particularly true for our children, for whom everything is new and fresh. The beauty of the world around us—the changing color of the leaves on the trees, the smoothness of rocks at a beach, the acorns left behind in autumn—all of these objects are full of beauty and inspiration. Being around and in the natural world as much as possible should be a primary goal of childhood. But while that’s not always possible (we all need to come inside and sleep most nights, don’t we?), it is possible to bring a bit of the outside into our homes and, in effect, into our hearts and souls all the time.

The activities in this chapter are focused on our children and the creative ways in which they can and do connect with the natural world around them. I’ve also included ideas for incorporating the changing seasons within your home so that you can remember the outside world once you’re inside.

FINDING YOUR SPOT

I believe it’s important for everyone to have connections to a “spot”—or preferably, many—in our natural world: a special spot where you feel grounded in yourself and connected to the earth; a spot where you find peace and inspiration; a spot that brings you joy and peace in times of stress, sadness, and confusion; a spot you can conjure up mentally and emotionally, even when you’re not actually there.

Don't let your financial or geographical circumstances get in the way of having a spot. You don't need to live in a remote rural area to have one; nature can be found in the middle of the woods, the middle of a city, or the middle of your home. And your spot needn't be an elaborate place; it can be anything from a house built in the treetops to a pot of basil standing in your kitchen. It doesn't matter what you choose for a spot; what matters is the connection you are making to the earth, the natural world, and ultimately yourselves.

You probably already have spots in your lives that you just haven't thought of as such, but I encourage you to do so. Start thinking of your spot as yours, and try to spend more time there. Close your eyes and try to hear, touch, and feel your spot so that you may know it as wholly as possible. Allow yourself to just be in your spot, both alone and as a family—I'm sure beautiful moments will be made. The following are some ideas of "spots" in nature that will hopefully inspire you to find or claim a spot of your own—one that speaks to you and your children.

- *A large rock on a forest path.* A rock that you come across often in your travels, that you can measure your children's growing height against, that you've spent time with, and that you know the feel of.
- *A child's garden.* A spot that is planned, designed, nurtured, and cared for primarily by your child. Where they will come to know the soil and what grows well in it. Where they can remember from year to year what was planted, where, how it grew, and especially what it tasted or looked like.
- *A climbing tree.* A tree that your child is able to climb higher and higher into each year. One that you study to find its species, size, and history; one on which you

know the missing branches. One that you watch change through the seasons, and see the wildlife living in or visiting. A tree at which you sit and think and feel.

- *A port city ferry terminal.* A spot where you witness the meeting of nature and human beings. Where you can watch the ways in which people connect, respond, and interact with the vast ocean in front of them. Where you know the type of birds that will appear and can sense their behavior and patterns of flight. Where you hear the sounds of the waves, the harbor activity, and the birds.
- *A flower box outside your window.* A spot where you can watch seedlings turn into flowering plants. A spot that insects may visit, and where you can watch the changing of a plant with sun and light, and know what it will look like under the evening sky.
- *A tree house.* A spot in the trees that you build and play in. A spot where you feel as though you are one of the birds, up in the trees, watching the world around, above, and below you.
- *A pot of basil grown in your home.* A plant you can nurture and watch and know when it is just right for eating,
- *A city park bench.* A spot where you can hear the mix of people, animals, and nature coming together. Where you see people interacting, animals living, and nature thriving with lots of life around it.
- *A lakeside dock.* A place where you hear the peaceful lapping of the water on the shore. Where you anticipate the call of a loon, the jump of a fish, the splash of a beaver's

tail. A spot you see change from year to year due to more or less rainwater. A lake where your toes know the temperature before touching the water.

Feeling a connection to the earth and knowing a special spot in the world will nurture a deep love of nature in your children. It is only when we love the earth with passion and intent that we are able to care for, help, and heal it as well.

SEEKING THE WILD

It doesn't seem to matter whether it's a small patch of dandelions on a tiny strip of city grass or a remote, wide-open lake with room to explore. Whatever the size, whatever the landscape, children have an innate connection to their surroundings. It is when they are in these surroundings that they can find such beauty, enjoy such bliss, and create such imaginative and carefree play. I know I am not alone in having some of my fondest childhood memories revolve around playing outside, with my only toys being the ones the earth provided for me—building homes for the squirrels, running in and around the trees, building a forest of sticks and rocks, covering the ones I loved in sand. When I am



Ezra runs to the water, his favorite spot.

with my children out in the world, I see them experiencing the same things. I watch them weave their way around the trees in a forest; jump into the ocean with abandon; and wrap their hands around a pine tree as they climb, getting covered in sap and loving the sticky feeling on their fingers. They aren't worried about tripping on the roots above the ground, whether or not the water is too cold, whether they have dry clothes to change into, or how many days it will be before all the sap is washed off their hands. These details are the details of adults. It is the job of children to just be in the world. To know it and to fall in love with it. There are no rules in the wilderness; there are no right ways to do things and no limits on what their imaginations can dream up. It is this that makes the wild so critical to their creative growth: limitless freedom and imagination. Every child I have seen can certainly rise to the challenge of creating in the woods. They know how to do this; we just need to give them the space.

I would encourage you, if you don't already, to create a space in your family's life for time spent exploring the world around you, whether it is a weeklong backpacking hike in the deep woods or an afternoon trip to Central Park. Find what works best for your family and your interests, and make it a regular part of your lives. Not just the "annual" camping trip, but a regular part of your weekly and, if you can manage, even daily lives. Take advantage of the work of your local land trust and land conservation organizations to discover the woods right in your own backyard. Both urban and rural dwellers have many spots of wilderness to share. Let your children know them.

Questing

Our ancestors instinctively knew how to walk through the world—through a forest, through a desert, across a river—and “read” the signs around them. They did so in order to understand a new land-

scape, to find food, to remember their way home—they did so in order to survive. While the need for survival is certainly not the same today, it does seem that we instinctively want to continue searching, hunting, and seeking in the landscape around us. It's fun, it's imaginative, and it's an adventure. When we are actively seeking, we are fully alive. All of our senses peak as we take in the world around us, and we become present in and full of our surroundings.

Questing is an old tradition that is growing in popularity in the United States and throughout the world. It combines elements of nature exploration, creativity, treasure hunting, community building, and place-based education. Following treasure maps, clues, and hints left by a network of other seekers, you travel through nature to find a hidden object. Through this process, you learn not only the details of a place, but also the spirit of that place. The energy, the atmosphere, the connection to the earth are tangible and experiential things in questing. This is a wonderful opportunity for families to spend time together in their natural world, seeking and searching as a team. It provides not only a connection to the earth, but to a community of fellow seekers as well. More information about questing and how you can get started exploring can be found in the Resource Guide.

The possibilities
for creative play
are truly endless
in nature.



GARDEN JOURNAL

I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.

—Henry David Thoreau

Most adults who garden discovered their love of gardening as children. If the idea of a garden sounds overwhelming to you—with all of the soil preparation, the seed selection, the weeding and watering—then start small. A garden doesn't need to be elaborate and large to provide us with lessons and a chance for creative exploration. It doesn't even need to be outside. A windowsill pot of basil or a basic basement plant are both great, easy ways to fit gardening into your life.

If you already garden, give your child a small plot of his own to play with. Let him choose what to grow and decide how to grow it and care for it. If you have a young child, some assistance is helpful, but never force a child to garden. You will probably need to do a lot of behind-the-scenes maintenance to a young one's garden, so keep that in mind when determining the size, and try not to carry the expectation of them maintaining it if it's unrealistic for their age. With young children, eliminate the expectation of getting lots of "real" gardening done. Gardening with children should be about exploration, questions, discovery, natural learning, and play. Move piles of dirt around, pull some weeds, watch the bugs, and catch a toad. Marvel at the mysteries of nature and gardening with them. Show them how much you love it, and they will surely follow along and find their own love. As your children get older, they can take a lead in gardening themselves, with you there to assist, guide, and join in their fun. But when they are young, it's all about the play and fun of gardening. Plant vegetables they love and plants that you know will

be successful and encouraging to a young gardener. Depending on your climate, sunflowers, zucchini, and pumpkins are all pretty much “sure things” that will bring smiles to your little ones’ faces as they help and anticipate them growing.

Gardening is truly a creative activity, and the best gardeners plan, design, and record their work. Give your children the space to record their discoveries about the world through gardening with their very own Garden Journals. Begin by giving them a blank, unlined sketchbook with thick paper (for lots of different art mediums to work on), and designate it their Garden Journal. Make this special book just for the purpose of drawing nature and recording the garden. A Garden Journal can be a way to record the growth of your plants/garden from season to season and year to year. Here are some suggestions for what you can include in this book. Don’t forget that these suggestions can just as easily be adapted to a pot of basil on your windowsill rather than a full vegetable garden. It’s all gardening!

Draw a Garden Plan

Let your imagination run wild as you picture what your plant or garden might look like. How will you set it up? How will you mark the rows? How will you water the plants? For an indoor garden, what pots or containers will you use?

Design Plant Markers

Use the Garden Journal to design plant markers for your garden. Cut them out and laminate them (our preferred method is covering labels in clear packing tape). Then place them on a stick to mark the garden or plant.

What's in the Garden?

Draw the vegetables and plants you'd like to see. And don't forget the garden "creatures" too! A scarecrow and its visiting crows? What about all those crawly worms and bugs and snakes?

Draw Your Observations

This could fill a whole book. Make it easy for your children to take their journal and some colored pencils out into the garden to sit for a spell and draw what they see. The plants, the insects, and the food are all good fodder for a young, inspired artist.

Draw the Projected Growth

What fun it is to draw what you imagine and hope the garden will look like at the end of harvest time and then to compare it to reality when autumn arrives.

Record the Weather

This can be as simple as drawing a sun or a cloud for a young child. Soon, they'll see the correlation between a day of rain and a sudden growth in their sunflower stocks.

Garden Stories

That worm crawling through the zucchini plant? Surely he's on some kind of grand adventure that you and your little one can dream up. Use your garden to inspire fun and creative stories.

Your child's beautiful Garden Journal will document not only the growth of your garden, but also the growth of your child, who is perhaps a budding gardener himself.



The Garden Journal provides a wonderful opportunity for recording and remembering the small but important moments spent in the garden.

FAIRY HOUSES

One of my earliest memories is of being at my grandparents' camp on a lake in Maine and building a home for the squirrels. My memory of everything else about that trip is vague, but I recall fondly and clearly the feeling of working alone for what seemed like hours, busily stacking acorns for a gate, pine needles for soft beds, and twigs for the house. I went to bed dreaming of what would happen to the home and woke excitedly to see if the squirrels had moved in. A few twigs had moved in the night, and I was sure the squirrels had rested there. Perhaps they had.