




MY NATURE FIX

Our ongoing series on the healing powers of green spaces

This month:
Lizzy Farmer,
who overcame
post-natal
depression and
alcohol addiction,
on the therapeutic
power of autumnal
foraging

I discovered foraging about five years ago, when my youngest son was small. I wanted to spend more time outdoors with him and started going out for walks with the pram in the countryside near me in Northamptonshire. Noticing things sparked my curiosity.

Before that, I had experienced post-natal depression and alcohol addiction. Life can be really hard and people often keep their struggles secret, especially those with addiction issues who can feel stigmatised.

As soon as I started foraging, it transformed my mindset and gave me a sense of achievement. Foraging saved my life. Each time I got out, I realised I'd walked, exercised, found some free food and chatted to people. There's such a friendly community around it.

Learning about the seasons and experiencing the cycle of nature is very healing. Although it sounds morbid, seeing life cycles – for example, mushrooms that grow, then decay and become food for insects – makes you realise life is short. This was a catalyst for me to change my life. I'd always worked so hard and put my energy into doing things I thought I should do, but foraging has helped me to be where I want to be.

I used to have such a busy brain and would have to drink alcohol to get to sleep, but now the fresh air, exercise and learning about different plants keeps my brain stimulated in a good way. It's like an absorbing treasure hunt.

Foraging also forces you to slow down. At home, it can feel like there's always something you should be doing. Once you have committed to spending time outside, if you start looking for things, curiosity will catch you and you will naturally take things slowly.

Every time you bend down to look at one thing, you notice so much more. There might be a beetle running past, something ▶

Foraging changed my mindset and gave me a sense of achievement

living in the gills of a mushroom, interesting mould on a tree trunk or a deer running by. Foraging becomes an observation of the natural world and pulls you in.

Mushrooms are my favourite thing to collect, especially bright orange Lactarius mushrooms, which ooze a carrot-like milk when cut. Early autumn is the best time to find them. There's a lot of fear around mushrooms; statistically, they are safer than plants, but it's important to be careful and check before you eat anything.

As well as the mental health benefits, foraging is a wonderful way to find free food and delicious restaurant-quality ingredients. I've collected everything from plums to chanterelle mushrooms, and I dry things so that I can cook with them year-round.

I am self-taught and passionate about teaching those who might not otherwise be able to access this. I run workshops through charities such as Mind, Bridge and We Free Women, helping more people to discover foraging and the healing benefits of nature. We also bring people out from cities for sessions and countryside retreats.

It's amazing to see the impact foraging can have on people who are struggling. For some, it starts a journey that can lead to improving their physical and mental health or quitting alcohol. There's more recognition of its benefits, too; many businesses now want to take staff out and support our work, and GPs are offering green social prescriptions to improve people's mental health.

Foraging is so therapeutic, but many people feel they don't have enough time to do it. Even if you just walk your dog or have a regular route to the local shops, you can start seeing what's there. In any one metre of hedgerow, there are probably about four species you could eat; you might spot hawthorn, hops, sorrel or nettles.

You don't need much kit to get started, just a basket, a small knife and some curiosity. We don't advocate apps in the industry, but there are fantastic books with seasonal guides and information, which is how I taught myself. Start by picking simple things you already recognise, like dandelion, wild garlic and berries.

Even if you have mobility issues, you could spot interesting things like nettles in just a loop around your local park. You can then render the stings with boiling water, scrunch, chop and add to pasta. All you need to do is get outside, have a look and see where it leads you. If I can help just one person to discover foraging and experience its mental health benefits, I'll be happy.

FIND OUT MORE about Lizzy's foraging workshops at tellus-mater.co.uk and see her finds on Instagram @lizzy_maryjane_farmer.

THINGS TO KNOW BEFORE YOU START FORAGING

Only pick as much as you will use and leave plenty for others.

Identify species before picking to avoid taking anything harmful, rare or protected.

Never uproot any wild plant without permission or pick from a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Keep to public rights of way or open access land unless you have the landowner's consent.

GET THE KIT



THE BASKET

Any basket is suitable for foraging, but ArtHouse Willows has a lovely selection of handwoven gathering and berry baskets. *Willow basket*, from £35, countrylivingshop.co.uk



THE BOOK

This invaluable handbook by foraging expert John Wright has illustrations, advice and guides on what to spot. *The Forager's Calendar* (Profile Books, £14.99)



THE TOOL

With its foldable blade and boar-bristle brush for cleaning produce, this beechwood knife is a favourite among foragers. *Opinel mushroom knife*, £17.99, souschef.co.uk