

Chapter Three



Growing Your Green Personality

Memory is a way of telling you what's important to you.—
Salman Rushdie, author

UNEARTHING OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD PLANTS

Now that we've examined our stress and our schedules, let's explore our attitude toward nature. What are your feelings about plants? Do you have any? Are they nice but mostly form the background of life? That's how I used to view landscapes. Kinda like wallpaper. I saw them but didn't *see* them. There was green stuff on the horizon. If that's where you're at, that's okay, though I bet we can uncover some kind of viewpoint. Discovering it takes a bit of soulful excavation. As in diving into our past. Oftentimes our attitude toward plants is in the depths of our memories. And most often, our key memories of nature are made during childhood.

So let me ask you a few questions.

Do you remember your first memory of a plant? If so, how old were you? Where was it?

Was it the early 2000s, the 1990s? The 1980s? For me, it was the hot funky 1970s.

My first plant memory goes back to Chicago, where I grew up. Northwest side. Go Cubs! Back then, people didn't think about

plants that much. Yards were for lawn chairs and kiddie pools. Trees were for shade. We lived in a two-unit apartment building with a square of grass and one tree for a backyard. Outside of a couple occasional tomato plants, neither of my parents gardened. We rarely used the yard, mostly for barbecues and to hang laundry. But in front of our house, my life was different.

On the parking strip, that wide patch of grass between the sidewalk and street, two catalpa trees grew. They were huge, towering far above our house and massive in diameter. Every August, they dropped their long seed pods, and every October, their papery leaves fluttered to the ground. They always captured my imagination. I played around them continually, pretending they had sentience and personalities. Needless to say, after reading about Ents in the *Lord of the Rings*, I found a kinship in those trees. They were mighty and powerful and, like Ents, kind and gentle. Of course, like Ents, they were expressive, too. Days after my father died, a lightning strike split one of the trees in two, which I interpreted as a message that the trees were distraught because we'd lost my dad.



Later, as a young adult, I saw Seattle for the first time on a trip to visit my aunt. I was stunned by the huge evergreen trees that grew everywhere: in parks, on golf courses, along highways, even in people's backyards. They towered over houses and commercial buildings, making those structures seem like toys. Furthermore, out in the country just beyond the suburbs, I found masses of coniferous forests. Evergreen tree after tree after tree. I couldn't believe so many trees grew in one place. Velvety hills covered in dark green spires folded into the snow-laced mountains. The whole area was like a giant wonderland. The Fangorn Forest come to life.

In an instant, I knew I was home. It was as if I'd arrived where I was supposed to be, though I didn't know why. It took a mere two months for me to go back to Chicago, pack up the few things I owned, and move to Seattle. To my mother's dismay, I never moved back to the Midwest, but when she visited the Pacific Northwest, she understood why I'd stayed.

Oddly, it took me almost twenty years before I finally realized why I'd really moved here. Before, when people had asked me, I'd said I needed a job and my aunt lived in Tacoma and I had nothing going on in Chicago. But that wasn't the deeper reason. The reason I'd moved to the Pacific Northwest was because I'd fallen in love. With giant trees. And by giant trees I mean *those giant catalpa trees* from my childhood. Two natural beauties of Chicago, of which at least one still stands today. My Ent-like trees had imprinted their majesty on my soul. Now, twenty-five years later, I'm blessed to live in a house on land where several giant conifers grow.

WHAT IF YOU'RE NOT *THAT* INTO NATURE?

Not everyone has a dreamy experience of books and trees. And to be honest, I don't have a lot of dreamy experiences because my dad dying young created a pretty sad childhood for me. But thankfully that time is past. I'd rather focus on you. What kinds of experiences with plants did *you* have as a child? Perhaps you grew up gardening with your grandma and it was awesome. Or perhaps

you lived in a high rise and only saw trees when you visited a park. Or perhaps your park didn't even have trees, just dirt and broken glass. You might have even had an experience with plants that made nature repulsive to you.

For instance, take my husband's experience. He grew up on a small farm in Bellingham, Washington. His family home was surrounded by trees of all kinds. Nature was literally his backyard for miles. As a boy, he was able to play in open fields, climb trees, explore a creek, build forts inside thickets, and ride his bike on dirt trails. But once he grew up, he couldn't wait to leave town. During his college years, he chose to attend the University of Washington in Seattle. Since then, he's always lived in the city and has zero interest in returning to rural life. He doesn't dream of managing his own small farm or growing vegetables or raising animals. Nor is he interested in gardening, backpacking, or camping. He has a vastly different kind of green personality than me. Why?

Well, the answer is in his childhood. When my husband was a boy, his family had an enormous kitchen garden. Vegetables, fruit trees, berry bushes. It needed continual tending. Every other day and every weekend, he had to pull weeds, which of course he found boring and repetitive. He didn't get chore money for his work, and he didn't get enough time to play. (He even had to often eat mushy squash for dinner, which he disliked.) So his memories associate plants with work and icky food, not fun or positive times. His interest in the natural world was crushed by well-intended parents who wanted to teach him the value of work but didn't provide the higher meaning the natural world offers. For him, plants are chores, not filled with imaginative dreams, wonder, or solace. So as an adult, he has a green leisure activity that doesn't involve tending plants but that works for him. I'll share it with you later in this chapter.

AMERICANS ARE AVOIDING THE SCENERY

This disconnection from nature happens for many people. In fact, according to a 2019 American Public Media survey, one in

six American adults reported never spending any time in nature. About 30 percent of those surveyed said their job or work-related issues left them little time to spend in nature. In particular, millennials, who said they felt happier after spending time in or with nature, avoided doing so because of long working hours and the associated costs.¹ Similarly, the Outdoor Foundation learned that Americans went on one billion fewer outings in 2018 than they did in 2008. Children went on fewer outings as well: 15 percent fewer than in 2012. One small gift from the pandemic was 7.1 million more people participated in outdoor recreation but ultimately that increase didn't reverse long-term trends.² While we're getting a lot done in the indoor working world, we're missing out on the pleasures of outdoor life.

FIFTEEN IDEAS FOR FIFTEEN MINUTES OF GREEN

We can connect with the soothing green world of plants in lots of brief ways. Here are fifteen. Can you think of more? If so, let me know via my website (www.karenhugg.com)!

1. Hop off the subway or bus a stop early and walk down a street with trees.
2. Find a green space on the map of your town. Park there and eat lunch.
3. Color with your kids in a botanic coloring book using green crayons or markers.
4. Visit a museum courtyard garden on free admission days.
5. Walk your dog and search for birds in trees you pass.
6. Relax in the bathtub while gazing at a plant on a stand or sill.
7. Dance barefoot with your sweetheart at sunset in a leafy park.
8. Lie on the floor and stare at the upward perspective of your largest houseplant.
9. Drive down that wooded lane you often see but haven't explored.
10. Sip a cocktail decorated with mint leaves with your roommate.
11. Chat with a neighbor about his or her beloved roses.
12. Peruse a glossy gardening magazine in bed.
13. Decorate your home with fallen leaves, branches, vines, and pine cones.
14. Jog to that one beautiful house with a lush garden.
15. Enjoy a meal at an outdoor restaurant with pretty flower boxes.

What's strange is how starkly this trend contradicts the geography of our country. Land-wise, America is the third largest country in the world, behind Russia and Canada. Unlike many countries, we have more than a dozen mountain ranges, several massive lakes, countless rivers, including thirty-eight that are more than five hundred miles long, wetlands in every state, precious saguaro-rich desert, vast coastal areas, and diverse forests. Plus, we have more than 22,000 city parks. It's astonishing how we have so many natural areas in which to play, yet most of us don't bother taking advantage of them. For some reason, we're avoiding the scenery.

Actually, I guess it's not a mystery. In fact, I understand the impulse to stay inside. Half of the year, it's too cold to go outside. Inside is more comfortable. It's familiar. Temperature controlled. Clean. In contrast, the outside world can be unfamiliar, even exotic or dangerous depending on where you are. It can be so cold your nose hair freezes or so hot you melt into a puddle. Plus, nature is hard and rough, not cushy, or if it is cushy, it's soak-through-your-pants wet, like moss in the Pacific Northwest. Even to my middle-aged self, the idea of sleeping in a tent on a yoga mat that passes for a mattress doesn't seem enticing, forget cool or hip. Never mind the potential of large furry animals stomping your ribs or biting your neck. Relieving your bladder on a 45-degree morning doesn't sound exactly fun, either. I get it.

All of those attitudes are totally legit. Then again, maybe they're a bigger deal in our minds than they are in reality. The point is, you are who you are in part from your early childhood experiences and in part from your adult tastes. The most important thing is to discover what kind of relationship to the green world your soul craves and honor it. Engaging with nature can happen in as little as fifteen minutes (see "Fifteen Ideas for Fifteen Minutes of Green" for ideas). And it can be as easy as sitting on your balcony beside a container of flowers every day or gazing at the tree outside your window. So let's see if we can excavate the clues to your green personality by examining your childhood experiences and your current preferences.