

An antidote to 21st century alienation ? Connect with nature

The United Nations celebrated World Environment Day June 5, and Canada celebrates World Environment Week June 5 to 9. Consider 21st century life dull and alienating? Don't fret. There's a solution that will reconnect you with nature and stimulate your stunted attention span. Around the world, the United Nations is calling on people everywhere to connect with nature.

Here in Canada, there is a world of possibilities. Friends of the Earth recommends three things to do: spot a bee, hug a tree and go pesticide free.

First: the bees. They're fuzzy, they're buzzy, and humans depend on them for pollination. But despite their importance, many people probably don't know that Canada has more than 850 species of wild, native bees. In any urban backyard, there could be 40 or more different species of wild, native bees. They're living all around, quietly going about the business of pollinating food and flowers. Connect with local wild, native bees by taking up bee spotting. And join Friends of the Earth in July and August for the second annual Great Canadian Bumble Bee Count.

Second: the trees. They're comforting, they're beautiful and they give back big time ? clean air, moderation from climate change, wonderful wood products, fruit and berries for people and wildlife friends. What would the country or communities be like without trees? So get out there and hug a tree. Better yet, get friends together and do a group hug.

Third: ditch the pesticides. No matter what you grow, from a balcony geranium to a pumpkin patch, there are better ways to deal with pests than pesticides. Instead, look for fatty acid soaps, biological oils and herbal repellents. When buying plants at a nursery or garden centre, make sure they're free of bee-harming neonicotinoids and other systemic pesticides. A garden should be good for people and good for the bees.

Check out foecanada.org for other ways to celebrate World Environment Day and Canadian Environment Week!

Bee-spotting ? Five top tips

1. Look for colours. Pay attention to what is in bloom and spend time around those areas. The easiest way to spot a bee is to look for them when they are foraging, as many nest in hard-to-see areas such as underground burrows and dead logs. Many bees are important pollinators and will be searching for flowers, shrubs, and trees that are in bloom as their source of nectar and pollen. What is in bloom changes throughout the season, so just get out there and have a look around, and then gravitate toward those areas.
2. Listen. One of the best ways to spot some of the larger bees, such as honey bees and bumble bees, is to listen. These bees make a loud buzzing noise as they forage and move from flower to flower. Many bee-spotters hear bees before they see them.
3. Be slow. Many smaller bees (such as mason bees) are nervous around humans, and tend to fly away when they are disturbed. But, if you are slow and careful with movements, you can peek into the center of a flower and often watch these smaller bees foraging. One of the best flowers to see this on is a dandelion, because the flower petals hide the bees as they forage. Look closely and you can often see many small, wild bees diving right into dandelions, so long as you don't give yourself away.
4. Be patient. If you do disturb a bee, just wait. Often bees will return to continue foraging in the same area, so you may have another chance to spot it again.
5. Say cheese. Believe it or not, Canada is home to more than 850 different species of bees. While you may only recognize one or two, bee spotting can open you up to an entire world that you didn't know existed. Snapping a photo of the bees you spot gives you a chance to try and identify the type of bee you saw later on. There are many ways to do this, such as searching on google, using a field guide, or talking to an expert. Try to snap a couple of shots from each angle (top, side, front), which will help with identification later on.