

If you dig nature, you'll want to check out these D.C. spots

Washington is a city striving to increase the opportunity for the idea called “biophilia.”

By Ann Cameron Siegal July 24

People who experience the sights and sounds of nature on a daily basis are happier, healthier and less stressed than those who don't, scientists have found. It's common sense. Would you rather spend hours in an artificially lighted school room with no windows or one with natural light pouring in, giving you a view of trees and flowers?

You don't have to go to a national park to get the benefits of interacting with nature. Washington is one of several cities working to increase the opportunities for people and buildings to exist with native plants and animals. The idea is called biophilia (pronounced bi-o-FILL-ee-uh).

A year ago, the city joined the global Biophilic Cities Network to figure out “how our urban places can be more nature-friendly,” said Stella Tarnay, who co-founded Biophilic DC.

School and community gardens are among the projects the group supports.

“Community gardens offer opportunities to plant and grow things, get your hands in the dirt, munch on things and enjoy social community experiences,” Tarnay said.

Look around your neighborhood and beyond. Are there places for rabbits to hide and birds to nest? Are there water features nearby? Do office buildings, hospitals and schools offer views of healthy green spaces?

Washington has many areas where nature can be enjoyed. Let's look at some lesser-known spots.

At the Southwest Duck Pond, mallard ducks paddle about and mature trees shade comfy chairs. The gurgling sound of four small fountains muffles traffic noise nearby. It's easy to imagine relaxing and reading a good book in this tiny urban park.

On the “green roof” at the University of the District of Columbia, bees and butterflies enjoy the colorful pollinator garden, and vegetables thrive. First-grader Claire Winchell recently visited while her mom did volunteer work there. When around flowers, she said, “I feel happy and peaceful,” adding, “Echinacea is named after hedgehogs.” (It’s from a Greek word.) This past spring, Claire helped plant 100 zinnias at her school, Lafayette Elementary, one of 127 schools in the city that had active gardening programs as of last year.

Tucked behind rowhouses and restaurants, Columbia Heights Green in Northwest Washington is a former junkyard that, through community efforts, is now a thriving garden where residents plant, tend and share organic vegetables such as kale, collard greens and tomatoes.

Mockingbirds sang recently as people brought games, art supplies and a Hula-Hoop for an evening of picnicking, bonfires and music. As a toddler happily explored every inch of the garden, Charlie Youngmann, a visiting college student from West River, Maryland, said, “Watching things grow from an early age can have a positive effect on how you see the world.”

In Southeast Washington, resident Sophia Cannaday, 7, took her very first boat trip. Aboard Living Classrooms’ science and environmental studies boat, named the MV Half Shell, she traveled along the Anacostia River, saw several ospreys on a nest and learned about salamander habitats. Sophia noted that if you had pet salamanders, it would be important to know how to “make your home feel like their home.”

Can you think of ways to help plants and wildlife feel at home in your neighborhood? Which native plants are best for attracting pollinators? Tarnay said, “Once you learn about plants and the animals that like them, you can find space for them.”

If you go

You can visit these sites where people have worked to bring nature into D.C. neighborhoods. All are free.

University of the District of Columbia green roof tours: 4200 Connecticut Avenue NW, Building 44. The next tour is August 12.

Reservations required. bit.ly/2tDQHOB.

Southwest Duck Pond: Sixth and I streets SW. southwestduckpond.org.

Columbia Heights Green: Enter at the brick-paved alley next to 3325 11th Street NW. columbiaheightsgreen.org. Saturdays 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Learn more

livingclassrooms.org : Offers environmental-science programs to schoolchildren in the Washington area.

fws.gov/pollinators: Interesting facts and activities about pollinators.

