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Ecotherapy Helps Connect People to Natural Health

By Sophie Braccini



Darlene DeRose Photo Sophie Braccini

Have you ever felt better after taking a walk in the woods or watching waves crash at the ocean? If so, you have probably experienced what has become known as ecotherapy. "Connection with the earth and its systems are at the core of ecotherapy," says Certified Master Gardener and Ecotherapist Darlene DeRose, who will lead the workshop, "Making the Most of Your Relationship with Your Garden," which is designed to deepen gardeners' experience with the plants that they grow, on April 2 at the Lafayette Community Garden.

DeRose says ecotherapy is a set of applied therapeutic methods that aim to reestablish the relationship between people and nature and improve people's health and well-being. She notes that there is a large and growing body of evidence proving the healing benefits of ecotherapy. The article "This is Your Brain on Nature," published in the January issue of National Geographic magazine, explains how spending time in nature benefits the human brain, and cites research by the University of Exeter Medical School, which found that people living near more green space reported less mental distress, and how researchers have found a correlation between reduced stress and short doses of nature, even if only with pictures.

"The studies have found benefits related to a broad array of physical and mental health issues, including depression, dementia, diabetes, social health and stress," she says.

The Lafayette workshop will address the latest scientific discoveries of the healing benefits of nature. "I believe that we deepen our ability to accrue healing benefits when we bring our conscious awareness to the activity of connecting with the earth and its systems," says DeRose.

The term ecotherapy was first introduced by Methodist minister Howard Clinebell in his 1996 book "Ecotherapy: Healing Ourselves, Healing the Earth." DeRose discovered the field of ecotherapy when she enrolled in the consciousness and transformative studies master's program at John F. Kennedy University. "One of my elective classes was the initial class in the ecotherapy certificate program," she says. "I was intrigued by the idea that human consciousness is affected by the ways in which we view the natural world."

DeRose explains there are several ecotherapy practices, from horticultural therapy to animal-assisted therapy to wilderness excursions, but she is drawn to vegetable gardening. "In addition to all the other benefits, it offers the added value of providing safe and healthy food to the gardener and improving nutritional intake," she says. "I am also drawn to community gardens because working in community can help participants feel connected with others, which supports social health and wellbeing."

Ecotherapy is a personal healing tool, she says. "I tend to turn to the natural world when I am stressed or sad. I walk or garden, which calms me and clears my mind, among other things. Ecotherapy has enabled me to have greater respect for the natural world around me and to feel a part of a greater whole."

The Lafayette workshop will be held from 1 to 2 p.m. Saturday, April 2 at the Lafayette Community Garden, 3932 Mt Diablo Blvd. (across from and just west of the Lafayette Reservoir). The class is free, however a \$5 donation is appreciated to support the education programs. To register and check out other programs offered by the community garden, go to www.lafayettecommunitygarden.org.

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