



**Melissa  
Harrison**

## Get creative with nature



When was the last time you made something for no reason at all, save curiosity and fun? Children, for the most part, play naturally and with no clear goal in sight, and do so especially easily in natural settings. Yet, as adults we can become results-driven: when we spend time doing something we assess its worth by what we achieved at the end of it, not what it felt like to do at the time. But one of the best ways of nurturing a deep, imaginative connection to nature is through creativity, and at its purest and most powerful, creativity is about play. Recording the hum of bees in your garden for an ambient track, photographing a year in the life of a street tree, keeping a nature diary, writing a seasonal haiku — engaging with the natural world to make something that didn't exist before can be a powerfully rewarding act.

The key is finding something we truly enjoy doing, whatever the outcome — rather than it being a skill we want to acquire, or an activity to excel at. A neighbour recently took a class called 'watercolour doodling'. The aim wasn't to create an accomplished picture, but to have fun playing with paint. It made me think of the pictures I drew as a child of things in my garden, before school taught me that 'good' art was detailed and representative, and anything more offbeat or expressive — more fun to create — wouldn't earn me a gold star.

When I was first finding my way as a novelist I found exploring London's parks and commons with a camera immensely important: unlike writing, nobody was ever going to mark my work, and it



didn't matter whether I turned out to be a good photographer or not. I just loved taking pictures of the plants and birds and insects that I saw, and by doing it week-in, week-out, as the seasons changed, my ability to notice wildlife of all kinds increased, the natural world seemed more and more detailed and fine-grained, and my connection to my nearby green spaces grew stronger and deeper, rewarding me in turn by bringing richness to my life. Now I write about nature for a living, but I still take a lot of pictures, and enjoy jotting down rough descriptions and even poetry that no-one will ever see.

Last year I had fun making cyanotypes using leaves and light-sensitive paper. A friend does a drawing a day — usually in her garden, but sometimes looking out of her window — giving herself just 10 minutes and not worrying about how polished the results are. Whatever draws you pleasurably into the natural world, slows down time and focuses your attention is worth pursuing. Young, old, or somewhere in between, playing creatively in and with nature is a truly life-affirming thing.



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### A LITTLE BIT WILD

The Yorkshire artist James Brunt arranges leaves, stones and other natural materials to create breathtaking patterns and shapes. The impermanence of this kind of natural art feels very liberating to make, and it's something anyone can have a go at.



**Melissa Harrison** is a nature writer and novelist, and editor of the anthologies *Spring*, *Summer*, *Autumn* and *Winter*, produced in support of The Wildlife Trusts.