

Ken's Answers To The Questions On Nature:

Q1. Why did you choose to begin gardening?

A: The notion of self-sufficiency -- growing my own food -- originally attracted me to gardening. Despite the seductive allure, and contrary to the common assertion that growing food is simple and satisfying, I discovered immediately that successful gardening is extraordinarily complex. I found that discouraging and scaled back my expectations.

As I stumbled through several growing seasons, I arrived at a compromise between unconditional determination and humiliating surrender. I began treating every plant as a biological experiment, driven by my inner scientist. Gardening became more about the process than the result. That tempered my expectations and taught me to tolerate failures more gracefully.

Q2. Would you consider it being out with nature?

A: Whether I consider a garden "nature" depends on its location.

My first garden was on a property adjacent to a wild green space. Though suburbia surrounded it, the green space could sometimes fool me into feeling like a secluded woodland. The garden was often a serene oasis embedded within a hive of human activity.

My current garden is in a quiet residential neighborhood surrounded by houses and a few tall trees. The privacy and ever-present local fauna provide many of nature's benefits, but too few to replicate the isolation of a forest.

Q3. To my understanding, you've always enjoyed hiking and walking quite a lot. Can I ask why? What does/did it do for you?

A: I do enjoy off-road hiking and walking, but confess I rarely trek to truly wild areas. When I do, it feels like a novelty more than a place I belong.

I also have an unconventional relationship with forested spaces. Contrary to the common stereotype of losing one's self in nature's verdant and idyllic embrace, I consider it more of a playground for physical fitness. I enjoy powering up inclines and scurrying over obstacles. Running on a narrow trail requires considerable concentration, which renders it more interesting than road running.

Beyond the athletic benefits, I enjoy the sense of seclusion, marvel at evolution's remarkable accomplishments, experience the intellectual satisfaction of identifying a previously anonymous plant, and feel gratitude when I happen across a rare species.

I measure those benefits against a number of drawbacks. I instinctively fear predators, despite knowing cognitively that such encounters are rare. I also have an irrational fear of snakes. Returning unscathed from a hike feels like a small victory over those fears.

Q4. I have a couple of quotes I've found online which I would like you to comment on in any way you like:

"Environmental psychology is rooted in the belief that nature has a significant role in human development and conduct"

"This study examined whether interacting with nature has beneficial effects on cognitive and affective functioning in Major Depression Disorder. We found that individuals diagnosed with MDD exhibited cognitive and affective improvements after walking in a nature setting."

A: I accept as given that humans are animals -- a fact we too often forget -- and are relatively recently removed from our primate progenitors. As animals, we're products of our environment, which extends to its influence on our psychology. That's as true about the environment in which a modern human is raised as it is about how evolution shaped our species in response to the varied environments we've historically occupied. Our bodies and minds have evolved a comparatively small amount in the short period of time since our species ventured out of our ancestral home.

Narrowing the scope to modern humans and natural spaces, I'm most often unaware of nature's effect on me in the moment, but I retroactively recognize the contrast after returning to urban life. I do occasionally feel palpable relief and relaxation in a forest, but never a metaphysical sense of being "connected with nature".

I subscribe to the voluminous evidence that time spent in nature has therapeutic value, as well as to research demonstrating the detrimental impact on quality of life caused by urban areas devoid of natural elements. I say more about the latter point in question 7.

Depression has been an unwelcome companion most of my life. Though I've never deliberately sought nature as a balm to mitigate depression's effects, I've hiked while depressed on many occasions. On those occasions, I benefit most from the experiential memories. I usually remember the experience fondly and forget that I was depressed at the time.

Though I rarely feel a measurable mood improvement after time spent in nature, I'm certain my depression would be worse if I had limited access to wild places. In that sense, I value the potential and possibility as much as the experience itself.

Q5. Back to your gardening, there are obvious huge benefits to gardening, but what would you say you get the most out of doing it? I understand it isn't easy, so where do you benefit?

A: I mentioned earlier that I find gardening frustrating and overwhelming. That's still the case, though tempered by experience. I persist in spite of it because I feel a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction when I grow a crop well enough to eat it.

I've met expert urban gardeners who grow a substantial proportion of the food they eat. I see the pride in their demeanor and want what they feel.

Moreover, my garden is aesthetically appealing. Every plant is an edible work of art.

I crave knowledge. Each new fact I learn inspires me to continue.

As a dedicated environmentalist, I feel content knowing that even my failures represent a tiny contribution to reducing my environmental footprint.

Q6. In relation to the article, the theme is the different effects on humans when we go from living our urban and technologically driven life today, to being in nature, and what that does for us (if anything). Is there something in particular you want me to focus on? Anything I should specifically mention that you think would be hugely beneficial to the readers?

A: Encourage your readers to visit a natural area with deliberate intent. Approach it as a psychological experiment. Academic research demonstrates the benefits, but not everyone will experience them. Test their hypotheses.

Ask them to be aware of their feelings before, during, and after the visit. Try to observe the sensations with a minimum of judgment. Compare experiences with a friend who performs the same experiment. The goal is knowing for the sake of knowing. File it under "nosce te ipsum": "know thyself".

Some will benefit. Others will feel the same. A few may feel worse. Many may be unable to notice a difference. All are valid. Those who notice positive changes gain a valuable mood improvement tool that they can deploy as needed.

The more times they run the experiment, the more data they'll gather and the better they'll understand the effects.

Q7. Human are extremely susceptible to their environment: we're generally happy, sad, angry, compliant or resilient dependent on the people we're around, and where we are. In relation to this, and anything else we've mentioned, are there any tips that you would be able to give someone, which you have come to find help works for you, or has once worked for you?

A: Seek a diversity of experiences in an array of environments: urban vs. rural, crowds vs. solitude, quiet vs. loud. Observe and document how you feel in different environments. This form of deliberate practice hones one's self-awareness and observer self. Doing so helps one identify which environments are most beneficial and most detrimental. This is useful in at least two ways:

- You'll know the environments to seek for maximum benefit, whether you define that as contentment, productivity, or creativity.

· When you find yourself in a challenging place, you'll better understand how to cope with it, how long you can tolerate it, and what happens when you exceed your tolerance limit. That will help you face the challenge with more confidence and awareness.

I've kept an emotion journal for more than half of my life. I write about how I feel with the explicit purpose of leaving record for my future self's benefit. I recommend it to everyone.

Knowledge is a precious asset. Seek it, hoard it, use it.

I'll leave you with some case studies you might find illuminating.

I heard an account of an urban park in a major American city, probably New York, that for years was a haven for drug dealers. A dense hedge surrounded it, concealing the nefarious activities taking place within. A new city planner took a fresh look at it and commissioned a complete redesign. They removed the hedge and added numerous elements that repelled the criminals and attracted local residents. It was a classic success story of how adding a green space can revitalize a community.

A similar, well-documented case is New York's Highline (<https://w.wiki/QgS>). The city converted elevated train tracks into a linear park and multi-use path. Though far from a traditional natural area, it became so popular that it transformed the property through which the park passed into a thriving residential and business corridor.

A final example is Milan's Bosco Verticale towers (<https://w.wiki/QgT>), an ambitious design that permits foliage up to and including trees to grow on the sides of the towers.