

Digital Tools to Connect With Nature

By Andrew Zeiger

The horticultural therapist should consider all resources to shepherd people's connection with nature. One major tool can be technology, as it is clear that our world in 2023 is digital. We must develop healthy ways of existing in this digital world. This is especially true for young people, who know nothing else.

Society has been concerned about children's screen use for decades, especially after a landmark study in the 1980's showed that the more a child watched television, the more likely they were to have obesity.¹

By the 1990's, children were spending more time watching television than any other activity except school and sleep.² Today, children may spend an average of five to nine hours per day using a screen solely for entertainment.³

Screens have a potential for harm, but benefits also exist. For example, prosocial programs such as Sesame Street can improve cognition and literacy.⁴ Video games can function as traditional play through identity development and socialization.^{5,6} Online support networks can be particularly valuable for those with ongoing illnesses or disabilities.⁷

It is unrealistic to expect people to grow up today without screens. Instead, we can aim to develop reasonable screen use habits. Using technology to connect with nature is one such application.

The horticultural therapist can play a vital role in promoting healthy screen use by providing digital tools to connect people with nature. Of course, connecting with nature using digital tools



Join our new AHTA community discord server to connect and grow our digital, nature-loving community.

is available to anyone, of any age or background, not just children!

Although certainly incomplete, the list on the next page may stimulate introspection about how you can use digital tools in your own HT practice. If you think of something that is not already available – consider creating it yourself! 🌿

References

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About the author: Andrew Zeiger

Andrew (Andy) Zeiger is a medical student at Sidney Kimmel Medical College who has begun coursework at the Horticultural Therapy Institute and received multiple grants to investigate primary care provider attitudes and horticultural therapy practices with youth. Andy, whose long-term goal is to create a pediatrics clinic on a nature site that marries modern medicine with early and consistent nature exposure, has published in the AHTA Magazine, served as a member of the AHTA working group on credentialing, and will be presenting at the 2023 AHTA annual conference.

Tool

Examples

Finding nature – Help people explore the amazing potential that nature offers in-person, virtually, or wherever they live!	
GPS-based games	Geocaching – find tokens/treasures people leave outside Pikmin – walk around virtually grown plant-like characters that flower behind you Pokémon Go – grow a Pokémon avatar by interacting with others outside Wokamon – the more you walk, the more your virtual Wokamon friend grows
Nature activities curated by people and websites	AllTrails – find curated trails posted online by a global community American Horticultural Society – admissions sales at U.S. & Canadian gardens Americana Public Gardens Association – map of free public gardens Discover the Forest – a campaign by the U.S. Forest Service to connect families to local forests and parks FindYourPark – tool for exploring National Parks Junior Master Gardener – a hands-on garden curriculum for children Morton Register of Arboreta – worldwide list of arboreta and free public gardens Nature and Forest Therapy – register for a forest walk with a trained guide Nature Atlas – record your hike's observations and explore others' Nature Sacred – a network of urban nature sanctuaries Therapeutic Landscapes Network – gardens in healthcare and related facilities
Nature sounds	Forest Bathing Life – mobile app that teaches forest bathing Nature Relaxation On Demand – high definition nature television Roots: Connect with Nature – immersive nature soundscapes TreeQuility – guided nature meditation
Nature video games	A Short Hike – exploration game about hiking Beyond Blue – educational underwater adventure game exploring ocean life Firewatch – mystery game fighting wildfires in the Wyoming wilderness Minecraft – world-building game Stardew Valley – idyllic farming game Terrarium Garden Idle – mobile plant-growing game
Social Media	Instagram – wide variety of people with diverse nature expertise YouTube – limitless channels of varied nature videos (e.g., Andrew Millison , Asu , Charles Dowding , Eisei-en Bonsai , Epic Gardening , Floret Flower Farm , Flow Hive , Herons Bonsai , Huw Richards , Kirsten Dirksen , MIGardener , National Geographic , RareSeeds , Self Sufficient Me , Soil Health Institute , etc.)
Video wildlife feeds	Explore.org Live Wildlife Feeds – collection of live camera feeds in nature around the world
Virtual online tours	Gardens Illustrated – curated list of virtual garden tours National Open Garden Scheme – films by private gardeners about their gardens The Nature Conservancy Virtual Field Trips – world-spanning virtual field trips with video, a teaching guide, and student activities
Virtual Reality	Nature Trek VR on Oculus Quest – fully immersive virtual nature experiences
Deepening connections in nature – From nature-identification tools to social communities, there are many ways to enhance our experiences while in nature!	
Making your own nature observations for research and education	GLOBE Observer – submit images of the natural environment for use in NASA-sponsored research iNaturalist – map and share observations of biodiversity Nature's Notebook – become a registered "observer" by viewing nature in your area weekly and entering information online TreeSnap – document trees to help scientists study tree health and diversity
Nature and wildlife identification	BirdBuddy – camera bird feeder that notifies you of bird visitors BirdCast – bird migration forecasts British Tree Identification – guide for identifying common trees in the U.K. Identitree Starter Kit – guide for common trees in the American Midwest Merlin Bird – bird identification using pictures and sounds PictureThis – plant identification using pictures
Online field guides	National Forest Explorer – map of U.S. national forests National Wildlife Federation (NWF) Nature Guides – a family of NWF apps with plant and animal specific field guides
Online nature hobby communities	Discord – wide variety of online chat-boards/communities based on a hobby E-Bird – watch birds, record observations, and share with a global community MakeSoil – online "match-making" between composters and food scrap donors
Garden/outdoor care	Garden Journal at Territorial Seed – draw out your garden plans Garden Plan Pro – map-based garden planner with plant information Gardenize; Into Garden – organize a history of notes about your garden Gardroid – plant-specific information, growth requirements, and harvesting MySoil – send your soil and receive a digital soil report Planta – individual care schedule and reminders for plants Plantnote: Plant Diary – watering reminder for plants Smart Plant & Tree Care – all-in-one for plant care reminders and information Sun Seeker – compass that tracks the sun's path Urban Meadow – help with creating an urban meadow