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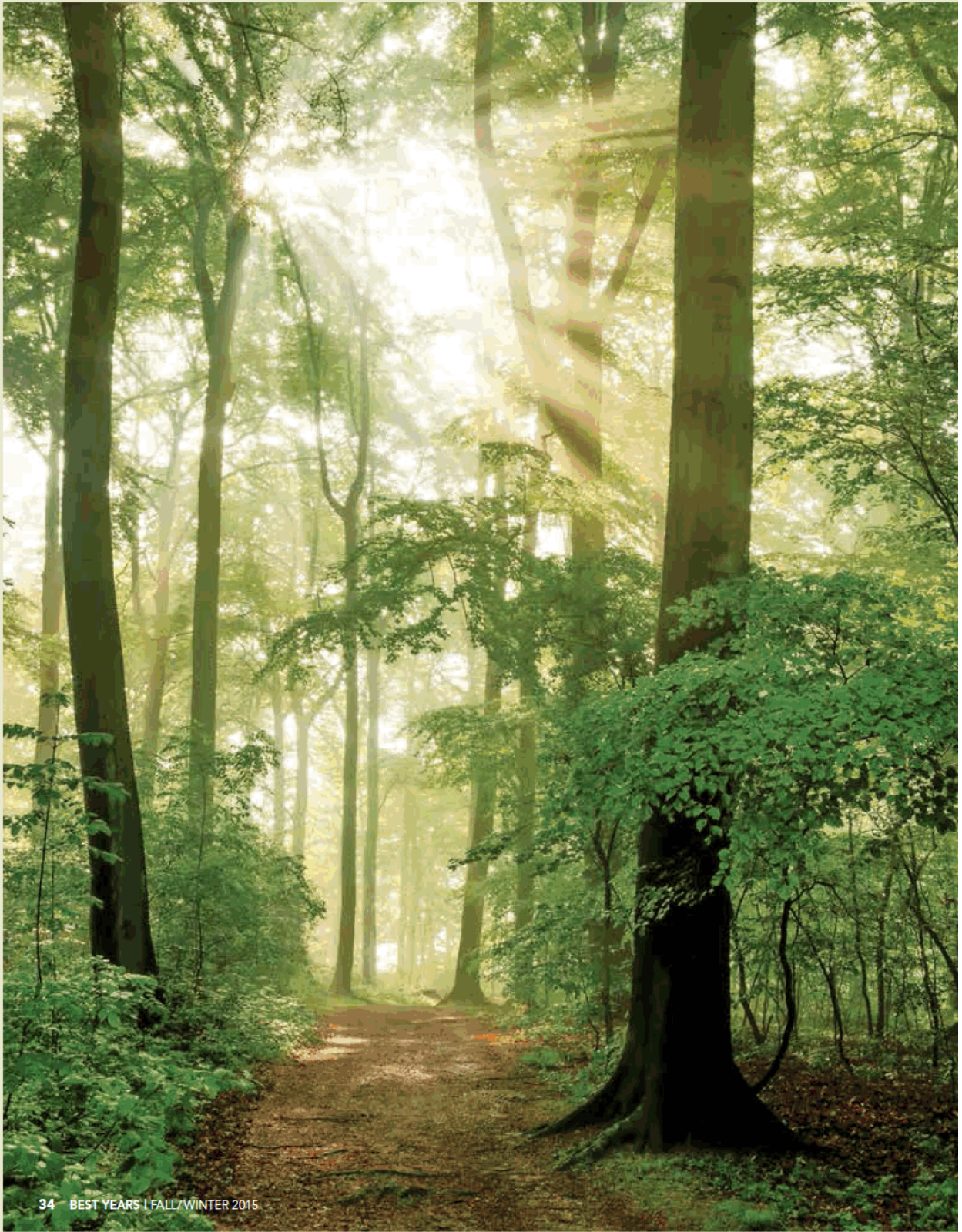
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# Good Health DOES GROW ON TREES

BY CINDY KUZMA

**M**ary Alice Mastrovito considered herself in tune with the natural world, especially its botanical residents — after all, she gardened professionally for more than 20 years.

But when she began guiding walks in the woods to share her knowledge of local plants and trees, she felt a profound shift occur.

"I realized the forest was offering something I couldn't quite name, but that was a calming influence on my life," she says. "I felt I was a different person when the walk ended than when the walk began — a better person."

Without realizing it, the 64-year-old Cleveland resident was reaping the benefits of something the Japanese call *shinrin-yoku*, or "forest bathing." The practice seems simple: Spend focused, intentional periods of time among trees, soaking them in through all five senses.

Science increasingly suggests it has profound effects on mental and physical well-being, including lowering blood pressure, boosting immunity, warding off depression, enhancing creativity and mental focus and relieving the physical and psychological effects of stress.

Mastrovito now knows *shinrin-yoku* by name and shares the gifts of the woods through her coaching and guiding company, Looking Deeper. After a week of training at The Morton Arboretum outside Chicago, she plans to join the growing ranks of certified forest therapy guides — qualified professionals who transform strolls down tree-lined trails into healing experiences.

## GUIDED WALKS IN THE WOODS

In lush green northern California in 2012, longtime wilderness guide Amos Clifford founded the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy Guides and Programs, which offers the training Mastrovito attended. Clifford hopes to build a large network of credentialed guides, allowing any doctor in the U.S. to refer patients to Mother Nature.

At least one already does. Dr. Lynn Mortensen, a family physician at Kaiser Permanente in Santa Rosa, Calif., keeps a

pre-printed prescription pad in her office advising 30 minutes of exercise a day for good health. Often, she'll write in the name of a specific park for the patient.

People with memory problems, depression, anxiety and caregiver stress find time in the forest particularly beneficial, she says. But almost anyone can boost their well-being in green space: "I think nature might be the most restorative spa a woman could ever visit."

A growing stack of published research backs the claims. For every 10 trees on a city block, residents feel about 1 percent healthier, according to a study published in the online journal *Scientific Reports* earlier this year.

## CALMING YOUR MIND AND BODY

Stepping more fully into the forest seems to enhance these benefits, other studies show. When you practice *shinrin-yoku*, your parasympathetic nervous system takes over, calming your fight-or-flight response. Your blood pressure and heart rate drop, and stress hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline, evaporate.

Meanwhile, your count of disease-fighting natural killer cells starts to rise, "creating bodies that don't get sick as easily," Clifford says.

In part, these effects are linked to mindfulness, Mortensen says. Absorbing the present moment while outdoors gives your brain a break from the constant overstimulation of today's technology.

Some believe absorbing organic compounds called phytoncides from plants and trees has beneficial effects, says Dr. JoDean Nicolette, a family medicine specialist at Sutter Health in Santa Rosa, Calif.

Alpha-pinene from conifers and limonene from citrus trees, among others, may stimulate the release of mood-boosting neurotransmitters and reduce blood pressure by relaxing the smooth muscle in blood vessels.

Though scientists continue to study exactly how forest therapy works, Nicolette says we shouldn't be surprised that it does. "For the great majority of human existence, human biology has been embedded in the natural environment," she says.



## AN OPEN INVITATION TO THE WOODS

Ready for your own forest bath?

- ▶ Set aside time — ideally, an hour or two — and repeat at least weekly.
- ▶ Head to a nearby forest or park.
- ▶ Go alone or with a friend or group. Spend most of the time in silence (share observations at the end of your walk).
- ▶ Leave your phone and camera at home.
- ▶ Walk slowly and intentionally.
- ▶ Use your senses to observe the forest through what forest guides call "invitations." They may include noticing what's in motion, letting your eyes linger on the dark places and shadows, listening closely to the farthest bird you can hear, and inhaling the scent of a flower longer than you normally would.