



COULD PHYTONCIDES HELP YOUR HEALTH?

The Art of Forest Bathing

by Marie Moliner

I did not expect it. In the back corner of the *Musée des Beaux-Arts de Sherbrooke* (MBAS), the odour of a forest fire.



Known as the creative force behind *La Grange du Parfumeur*, Magog native Alexandra Bachand has joined the ranks of new artists featured at the *Musée des Beaux-Arts de Sherbrooke* where her olfactory work is presented in a multisensory exhibition entitled "Entends-tu le chant du canari?" (Do You Hear the Canary's Song?), responding to the painting "Bois Brûlé" (Burnt Forest) by Jean-Paul Lemieux (1904-1990).

Imagine my wonder when I learned I was smelling art, carefully crafted by artist and perfumer Alexandra Bachand, in response to *Bois Brûlés*, a 1952 painting by Jean-Paul Lemieux. Her works, entitled *Entends-tu le chant du canari?* (Do You Hear the Canary Singing?), are olfactory sculptures designed to engage the sense of smell.

The Eastern Townships offer countless opportunities for forest bathing. "Woodland Walks" trails in Dudswell, East Angus, Shefford, Sherbrooke, Piapolis, and Granit are maintained year-round. Discover them at easterntownships.org.

Smell is an important factor in health biomarkers. Olfaction is the most ancient sense and is directly connected with emotional areas in the brain. It gives rise to perception linked to emotion both in everyday

life and in memory-recall activities," wrote Silvia Francesca Maria Pizzoli in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*.

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increasing ability to focus, accelerating recovery from surgery or illness, raising energy levels, and improving sleep. One theory being investigated is that phytoncides, airborne chemicals that plants give off, help increase the number and activity of a type of white blood cell called natural killer cells (NK).

The *Balade en Forêt* exhibit at the MBAS interprets connecting with nature through art. Bachand's "Do You Hear the Canary Singing?" uses scent to evoke both the destruction and resilience of forests. Her reference to canaries—historically used by miners to detect toxic air—serves as a metaphor for the fragility of ecosystems under the growing threat of wildfires, and touches on the highly toxic work environment of coal mining.

The forest—whether explored in nature or interpreted through art à la Thomas Corriveau—offers profound lessons on health, mindfulness, and renewal, reminding us to pause, reconnect with the

The nose knows. If you have ever lost your sense of smell, you will know how important it is to your overall well-being. Loss of smell, or anosmia, is a common and early symptom of some diseases, including Parkinson's.

Back at the MBAS, visitors are invited to lean in close to two sculptural podiums, inhaling a fragrance infused with both earthy and charred aromas. The painting depicts a forest that has burned; Bachand's sculptures present two scents, a smoky undergrowth and *Helichrysum angustifolium*, a European flower more commonly known as Immortelle or the Everlasting Flower.

This sensory experience forms part of *Balade en Forêt*, on display at the *Musée des Beaux-Arts de Sherbrooke* until April 20, 2025. The exhibit strives to recreate the visual and sensory immersion of a woodland walk, or *Shinrin-yoku*, a term coined by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in 1982, which translates as forest-bathing.

Throughout the gallery are mossy corners, mushrooms borrowed from the Sherbrooke Museum of Science and Nature, and a mix of curated and commissioned artworks. One standout is a wall-length hand-painted video by Thomas Corriveau of Annabelle hiking in a verdant glade, a still of which graces this month's cover. Corriveau says:

My partner and I have always loved going for walks in the forest. Ten years ago, we settled for good in the Eastern Townships, and she started hiking more and more, which brought her to an impressive level of physical fitness. When I saw her walking ahead of me, I was struck by her transformation and the energy she radiated.

Dr. Qing Li, the pioneer of forest medicine research, describes the practice of *Shinrin-yoku* as a bridge between humanity and nature. "Bathing in the forest atmosphere" involves connecting with nature through the senses. Unlike hiking, forest bathing is not about covering distance or exertion—it's about mindfulness, presence, and fully engaging with the sights, sounds, textures, and smells of nature.

Closer to home, the New York Department of Conservation website lists some 25 studies that explore various health benefits of spending time outside "in nature, green spaces, and, specifically, forests." Researchers are studying such possible benefits as boosting the immune system, lowering blood pressure, reducing stress, improving mood,

world around us, and breathe.

At the close of my visit, I returned to Bachand's installation. Could a scent born of a burned forest still evoke hope? The answer lies in the *Immortelle*, which thrives in inhospitable rocky terrain. Dotted with small sunny blooms that stay bright yellow even after drying, it "gives off an almost straw-like sweet scent, with hints of honey, tea, rose and chamomile" (PerfumeSociety.org).

This delicate yet hardy bloom encapsulates the essence of forest bathing: finding vitality and resilience, even in the face of adversity, reminding us of nature's potential for regeneration.

The Sherbrooke Art Museum (*Musée des beaux-arts de Sherbrooke*), at 241 Dufferin, is open Wednesday to Sunday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The multisensory exhibit, *Balade en forêt* (A Forest Ramble), continues until April 20, 2025. Entrance is free of charge on the first Sunday of each month. More information is at MBAS.qc.ca



After four decades in Toronto, Marie Moliner returned to the Eastern Townships with the love of her life, Kevin Whitaker, following his diagnosis of Parkinson's Disease and Lewy Body Dementia. Kevin died on January 1, 2025, defying the odds by living some three years beyond his prognosis. Marie is convinced that the ancient hemlock grove surrounding their home extended Kevin's life and played a vital role in the health of both of them, thanks to the phytoncides it releases—a testament to the profound benefits of *Shinrin-yoku* (Forest Bathing) and the restorative connection between humans and the natural world.