

The great outdoors

Fancy joining a 'green gym'? Then step outside for the next big thing in the fitness world.

'Green exercise' is the latest fitness trend, with research suggesting that exercising outdoors instead of within four walls can give your workout an extra 'happy' dimension.

A study at the University of Essex found that people who exercised outdoors reported significant improvements in levels of self-esteem, a more positive mood and lowered stress levels. What's more, the results weren't dependent on how long or hard people exercised for: the important thing was that they were being active whilst enjoying being outdoors. 'We already know there is evidence to show that exposure to

nature has positive mental effects, and to show that physical activity is good for us,' says Joanne Peacock, research officer in 'green exercise' at the university. 'The purpose of the study was to look at bringing the two together for maximum benefits.'

In Dorset, fitness instructor Jo Rainsley from Poole began holding outdoor exercise classes earlier this year and says she has had a fantastic response. 'Our fitness group meets up in a local park where we use benches for exercises like tricep dips, skipping ropes and the natural gradient of different areas to provide a fun workout

suitable for all abilities and ages,' says Jo. 'Most people tell us how exhilarated they feel at the end of a session and we are attracting people aged 16-70, many of whom who would never use a gym.'

Another outdoors alternative is to join one of the Green Gyms set up by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV). There are currently around 70 of these groups across the UK and they offer the opportunity for a free workout in the open air by taking part in practical conservation work such as planting trees or creating community gardens.

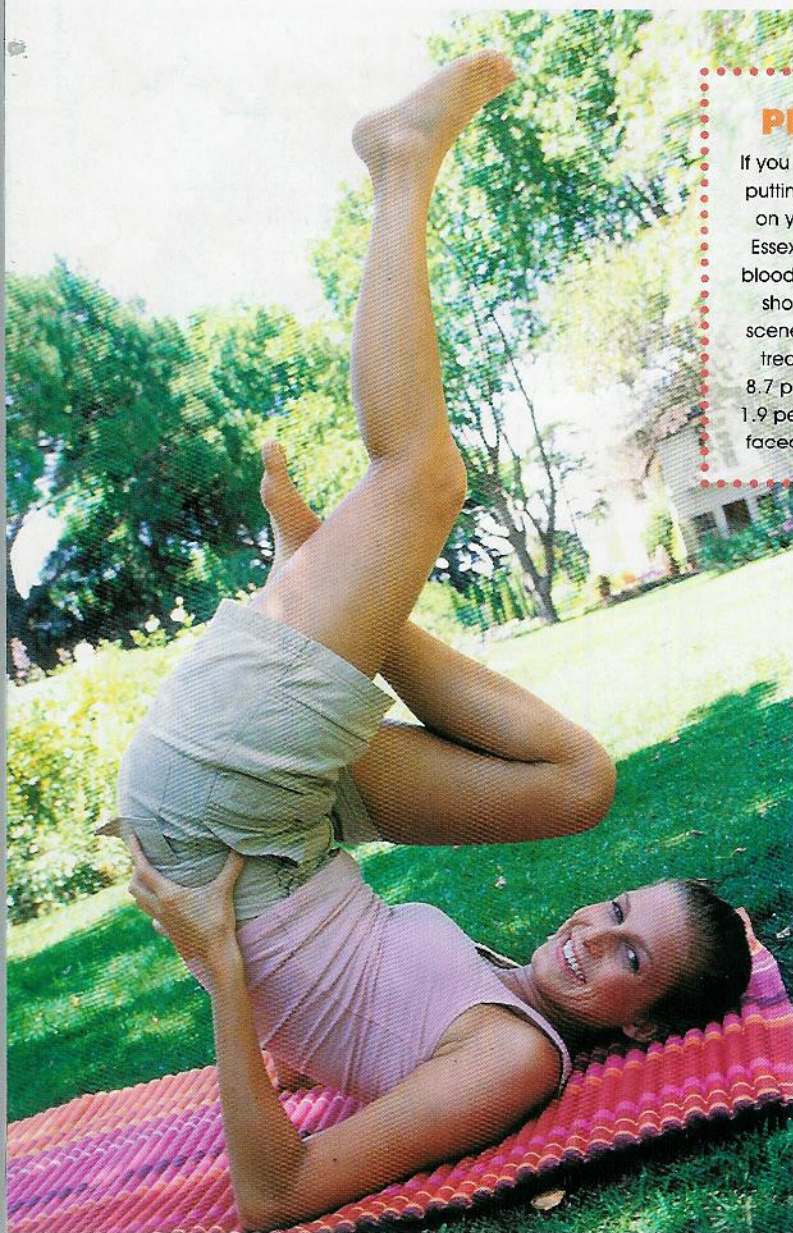
'Green Gym sessions normally last for two to three hours and include gentle warm-up and warm-down exercises,' says Matthew Beesley of the BTCV. 'Everyone is welcome regardless of age, experience or ability and you work at a pace that suits you.'

Independent research by Oxford Brookes University found that a Green Gym session was a more effective workout than a step class, although Matthew stresses that the social element is a big bonus too.

Why exactly do pleasant surroundings make such a difference? Some experts believe that we are all country dwellers at heart and even people who live in towns benefit from a regular 'nature fix', even if it's just walking down a tree-lined street. The perfect excuse to escape to the country! □

PICTURE IT!

If you can't get outdoors, try putting a lovely landscape on your wall instead. The Essex study found that the blood pressure of exercisers shown pleasant natural scenes while they ran on a treadmill decreased by 8.7 per cent, compared to 1.9 per cent for a test group faced with a blank screen.



INSIDE OUT

Get the outdoor benefits of your favourite exercise with these 'green' swaps:

Original option...

An hour's housework
A yoga class
Spinning class or exercise bike
An aerobics class
A swim in an indoor pool
The gym treadmill

Green choice!

An hour's gardening
Outdoor yoga stretches
A real bike ride
A 'Green Gym' session
A dip in the sea
A country walk

Find out more: Log on to www.btcv.org to find out more about the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.