Plant some green to boost your community's health

By Aaron Warnick

They paved paradise and put up a parking lot. Joni Mitchell's classic "Big Yellow Taxi" has been popular for almost 50 years. It's as relevant today as it was in 1970, if not more so.

Nowadays, more people live in cities and towns than in rural areas. Over two-thirds of people around the world will live in urban areas by 2050, the United Nations says. As we move closer together, it's key we bring as much nature with us as possible.

"There's a lot of research out there that shows the links between greening up your space and mental health benefits," says Rob McDonald, PhD, lead scientist for the Global Cities program at the Nature Conservancy.

Some health providers have started writing prescriptions for nature, telling their patients to actually go take a hike. But don't wait until after your next checkup to schedule yourself for weekly or daily doses of nature.

"Just give yourself that nudge," McDonald says. "Prioritize it like brushing your teeth."

Taking a regular walk or hike in nature can help lower your stress and blood pressure and it can help counter depression. Research even shows it can help you stay sharp as you age.

If you live in a city but don't have a spacious park nearby, you don't have to fight traffic out of town to cash in on the benefits of nature. In 2018, researchers went to Philadelphia and had some vacant lots cleaned and greened up. They found that after people had lived with the new and improved green lots, they reported better mental health.

Gardens are a great way to beautify your block, but planting trees is even better.

"A little more nature in your landscaping has a lot of benefits," says McDonald, who studies the effect of trees on urban areas.

Trees can cool the space around them by providing shade and releasing water vapor. If well-placed by your home, they can cut down on air conditioner use, driving down your electric bill and reducing your carbon footprint.

You don't have to go much farther than your neighborhood to support trees.

"Pay attention to your street," McDonald says. "If you see a tree that is sick or damaged, call 311. If you see a note on a tree saying that it's going to be removed and you're concerned about that, call it in. If there is a bare spot on your curb, call your local government. A lot of municipalities are looking for places to add green."

A healthy tree canopy in your neighborhood can help fight climate change. Trees act as natural air filters, storing and cycling out carbon dioxide and releasing fresh air. An average-sized tree can store hundreds of pounds of carbon dioxide over its lifetime. Tree-lined streets can cool down your whole neighborhood.

Trees can also capture unhealthy air particles in the air from busy roadways and industrial sites. Particulate matter is a nasty form of air pollution that can contain acids, chemicals and metals that you can breathe without knowing it. The Environmental Protection Agency warns that breathing these particles can be bad for your heart and lungs. Tree branches and leaves catch some of these particles before they get down to you. More trees in your neighborhood means less air pollution is going to reach the sidewalk.

If you weren't already sold on the benefits of trees — though you really should be — they also naturally improve water quality. Rain or melting snow flows down your street, picking up litter and other pollution from the road. Trees can drink up a lot of that water before it runs off into the storm drain.

If you're looking to start adding trees to your yard, try planting trees native to your area. Native trees are more likely to thrive and be a better home for birds and bugs.

Even if you don't own a home or have a yard, you can make a difference in your neighborhood. Volunteer to help at a local park or to plant trees in public areas.

"Lots of cities already have programs in place," McDonald says. "Just reach out to your city's urban forester."

>> For more tips on adding trees to your neighborhood, visit www.treepeople.org.

Photos courtesy iStockphoto: Trees by Suriya Phosri; woman, Juliet514; walkers, Django; tree planting, Wavebreakmedia

Adding some green to wherever you are

Even a little green can make a big improvement. Check out these tips:

◆ Add some window boxes or potted plants on your stoop or balcony.

◆ Join a community garden, or create one in your neighborhood. Check with local government to see if there is an unused city lot that you can turn into a garden.

◆ Pick up litter as you walk. Or better yet, go on a walk to pick up litter. Litter can smother plants that would otherwise improve your neighborhood.

◆ If you have a yard, consider coverting it to a meadow. You can turn your patch of boring lawn into a diverse ecosystem.

◆ You can transform your yard into a bee sanctuary by planting native wildflowers or blooming trees. You can even build a bee house to support pollinators.