

we don't take stock of what we can do on their behalf.

Insect decline is at an all-time planet-threatening high. Our overzealous gardening efforts have had a big hand in thwarting nature's smallest garden workers. Native bees and other superstars of nature have declined up to 60 percent in some areas like Germany and Puerto Rico. I thought maybe the culprit was mostly pesticide toxins that are harming our good bugs, but there is more to the story. Our bugs have lost their homes, and it's humans that have raked them away. Habitat loss eliminates the bugs' ability to continue life, of course.

Old wood and leaves are where home is for our insects and microorganisms. We've come to realize that our insect populations are declining, and the source of the decline is loss of habitat caused by excessive tidy gardening. Lazy gardening to the rescue!

The insect advocates at the Xerces Society recommend keeping leaves intact to maximize their value as invertebrate habitat. Shredded leaves may contain more dead insects than live ones!

Whole leaf mulch helps keep the soil from freezing, even under a blanket of snow. So, fallen leaves can save this situation, helping garden bugs and micro-organisms survive the winter season and support the gardens and nature in springtime. Some gardeners use an empty bed and cover it with leaves and then burlap to keep things in place. Gardeners at Growveg.com recommend using "... stored leaves to pave over packed ice or to relieve muddy conditions near the bird feeder in winter. When tightly packed

and stashed in a dry place, leaves stored in paper bags stay autumn-fresh for months ..."

In our busy lives, we often think that a super-tidy garden, lawn or clipped trees will show we care about where we live, but these overzealous actions have actually destroyed where we live and beyond. We may need to bag up some leaves to keep walkways safe and ditches from clogging, but the more we know about how to keep the garden and its creatures healthy, the better. Some municipal recycling programs that rely on composting now require paper bags so everything can compost, because plastic bags ruin the composting process, turning into ragged pieces that have to be sorted out or the compost is unusable.

Each year, usually starting in February, I teach my art studio students, especially grades k-12, about the importance of wetlands habitat, how the wetlands are the barometer of the Earth's health. We study the habitat of wetlands for many reasons; the kids think they would like to be winners in the National Junior Duck Stamp Design contest, and the artwork is due postmarked in March.

Most of my students win ribbons and awards for the Colorado state contest. (I do make them work hard, but they don't realize that because it is fun and rewarding to do!) But the real win is the knowledge they gain and can share with others about how things thrive in nature and how we as humans depend on nature to survive. When we care for nature, it cares for us.

Back to the garden, then. Leaving habitat intact

over the winter is relatively safe, and it is nicknamed "lazy gardening" because it stays as undisturbed as possible. Under our snow blanket here, there is plenty of life happening. That life is part of the chain of events that keeps our land and forests and the needed balance healthy and safe for us. Come the warm months, after the bugs and birds and critters don't need their nests the same way as in winter, we can tidy up and compost what's left.

### Indoor winter gardening

Saving eggshells and coffee grounds helps enrich our soil to help our plants grow indoors or outdoors. Most potted plants love a good shot of ground eggshells (I dry mine out and "dry blend" them in my blender). Three cups of eggshells turn into just a few spoonfuls of eggshell powder, and it is chock-full of calcium and minerals the plants love, so in the pot they go.

Next month, we'll look at what to start indoors for our gardens—some for windowsill crops, some to go outdoors. I've had good success with raised garden beds that were covered in leaves, too. Volunteer lettuce and greens had their seeds sprout and peek out from their leaf cover, and on warm sunny days they grew up to 6 inches. Shhh, don't tell them, but that's good for a salad.

*Janet Sellers is a writer, artist, and ethno-ecologist posing as a nature-led lazy gardener giving talks and garden workshops for successful gardening in our forest ecology. janetsellers@ocn.me.*

### Art Matters

## The extraordinary benefits of living with art



By Janet Sellers

Art is one of the few things we can buy, own, and leave as inheritance that has not been engineered by a marketing committee and mass-produced in a factory bereft of any heartfelt connection.

I was recently asked to explain, "How does owning art change the way that you feel about it?" The questioner wanted to know what owning original art can do for a person. My fellow artists and I live with original art all our lives at home and at work—we live that way every day—but lots of people might not realize the power of living with art and its support for daily life.

Being able to be with original fine art changes the very environment that we are in by virtue of proximity. It is an influence with a pulse of creativity and imagination and originality. Just like being out in nature and being with real trees, real grass, real plants, real outdoors, and real sky, being with original art has an impact that nothing electronic or artificial can offer. Real art materials are made with tactile materials such as charcoal and pigments dispersed with water or oil onto the substrate as real materials we can physically relate to. Our very eyesight experiences the light and perception of the art as made by the artist. Our mind interprets these light waves and visuals, and when the art is good art, especially uplifting artworks, all these combine to have a good influence on a person, especially children.

Art enriches our world view. The creative juices of artists and their art seem to share a basic human resonance worldwide. As an artist, the main source of not only inspiration but genuine life enrichment is based on optimal thinking and creating. Artists must constantly hone their skills of looking, interpreting, discerning, and transforming materials from a blank canvas or stone into a physical triumph of their vision. This effort comes through to the viewer, too, lifting up and enriching others' thoughts, a kind of tuning in to each other.

I was pen pals with a Japanese student from grade school through college. Her dad was the director of a famous museum in Japan, and he often came to the U.S. where I got to meet him and visit with him sometimes. My pen pal wanted to improve her English and visited the U.S. one year, so I showed her around. I shared my beloved homeland of then-pristine California beaches, Laguna Beach art galleries and the plein air artists as they were painting. She delighted in the gentle breezes, art, palm trees and orange groves.

Later, I was a visiting student in Japan and lived near her dad's museum. It was filled with National Treasures, and I could see those world class artworks every day. Those daily art experiences were profound, albeit just a few minutes in each day. In about two years, my awareness to many other things beyond art was much richer than I ever expected.

Something happens when we appreciate art.

We appreciate much more of all of life—the people, places, and our thirst for learning become broader, deeper, and more satisfying. My enjoyment of art and those artworks in Japan had increased incrementally, yet steadily and powerfully, and it gave me an enduring ability to enjoy what life offers ever after.

Just as reading good books improves our minds and relationships with others, so does living with good art. Studies show a person's awareness and willingness to grow and learn in many ways includes visual and spatial awareness via viewing and investigating art, and solving all kinds of life's problems is easier to do. Mental challenges are easier to work with, and mental clarity and health stay optimal. Some medical schools give art classes and museum visits to improve observational skills, thereby improving a person's awareness when they become a doctor.

Columbia University School of Medicine and Weill Cornell Medical College focus on art specifically using Anna Willieme's annual six-week course "Observation and Uncertainty in Art and Medicine." Resident physicians and students convened weekly for two hours at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where Willieme guided them through a series of exercises that involved looking, sketching, and sharing their thoughts about specific works of art. The exercises and subsequent discussions helped residents improve communication skills between doctors as well.

Studies also show that keeping the mind alert, growing, and stimulated by creating new neural pathways from learning new things lowers the chance of mental decline. Benefitting from the simple stimulation of creative ideas in visual art and visual thinking is optimized by what we keep around us. Being with excellence is how we learn excellence, and the sooner the better, most assuredly for children. Good art is simple and enjoyable for this.

My own children were art-influenced every day of their lives. I was making art and my friends were making art, and they were also influenced by the art classes and students I taught in my studio. My kids didn't seem to be overly impressed with art enrichment back then. Often, kids don't know how good they have it until much later in life. But that close, early art influence showed up powerfully as they went out into the world. They've easily been able to enjoy meeting new friends and discussing their views and the cultural influences of places they visit. Thankfully, that's the just reward of inoculating art and world culture into kids—to help them become better people and make them into who they are. These good things go in effortlessly by close contact to good art.

*Janet Sellers is an artist and writer. She teaches drawing and painting to all ages at her local art studios, and her public art sculptures are on view in Colorado cities and parks. janetsellers@ocn.me.*



**Above:** *Barefoot and Pregnant*, an image by Cas Foste from her life series, *People with Big Heads*. Foste will present *Put on Your Best Display* at the Palmer Divide Photographers Group, Mon., Feb. 11, 7 p.m. at the Mountain Community Mennonite Church, 643 Hwy 105, Palmer Lake. Cas Foste will share insider tips about how to show your work in galleries. All are welcome. The group meets the second Monday each month. For information call 649-4241 or visit [www.pdphotographers.com](http://www.pdphotographers.com). *Provided by Palmer Divide Photographers Group.*