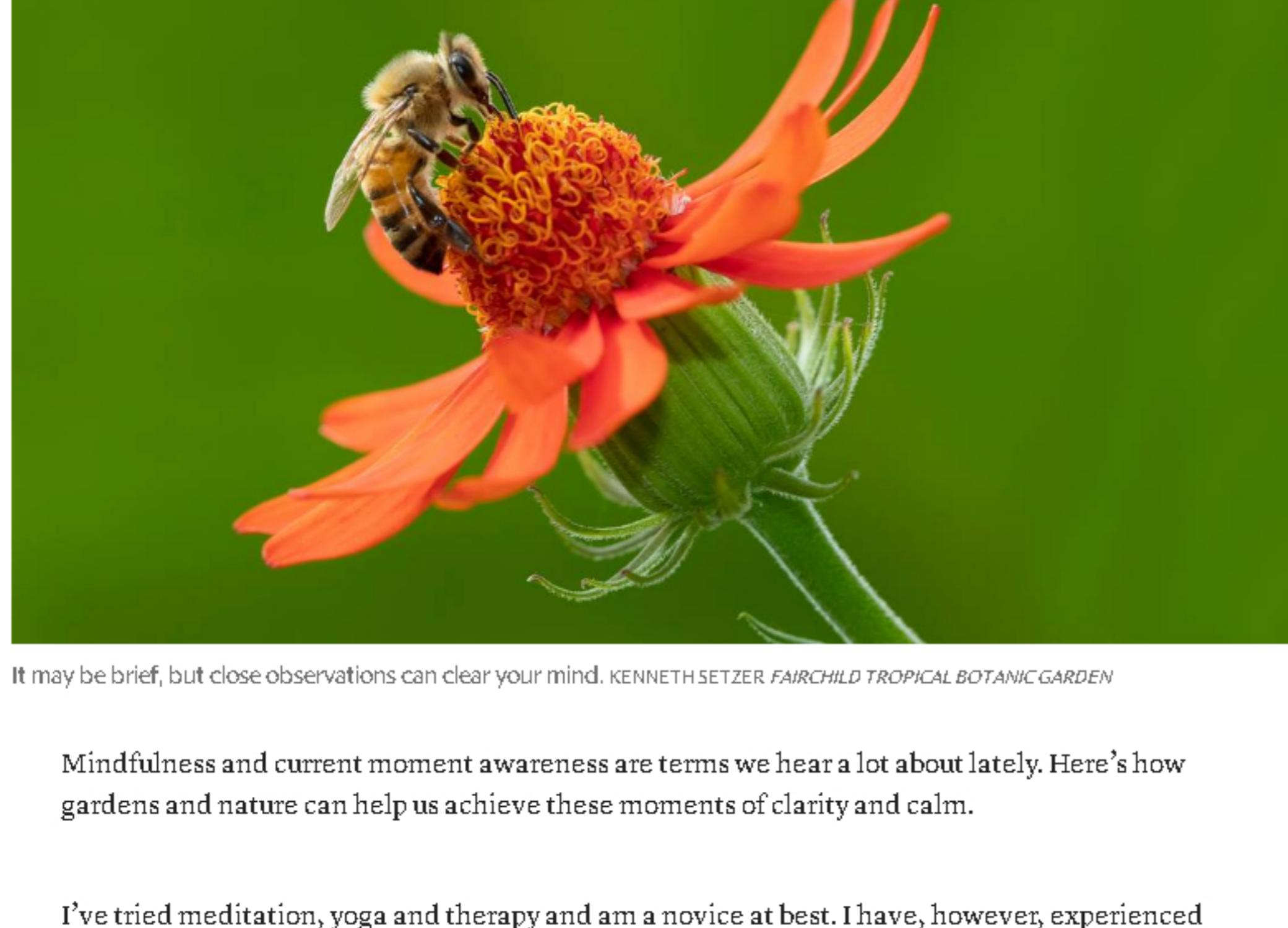


## Want to achieve mindfulness? A stroll through nature — and a camera — can help

BY KENNETH SETZER FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN  
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It may be brief, but close observations can clear your mind. KENNETH SETZER FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

Mindfulness and current moment awareness are terms we hear a lot about lately. Here's how gardens and nature can help us achieve these moments of clarity and calm.

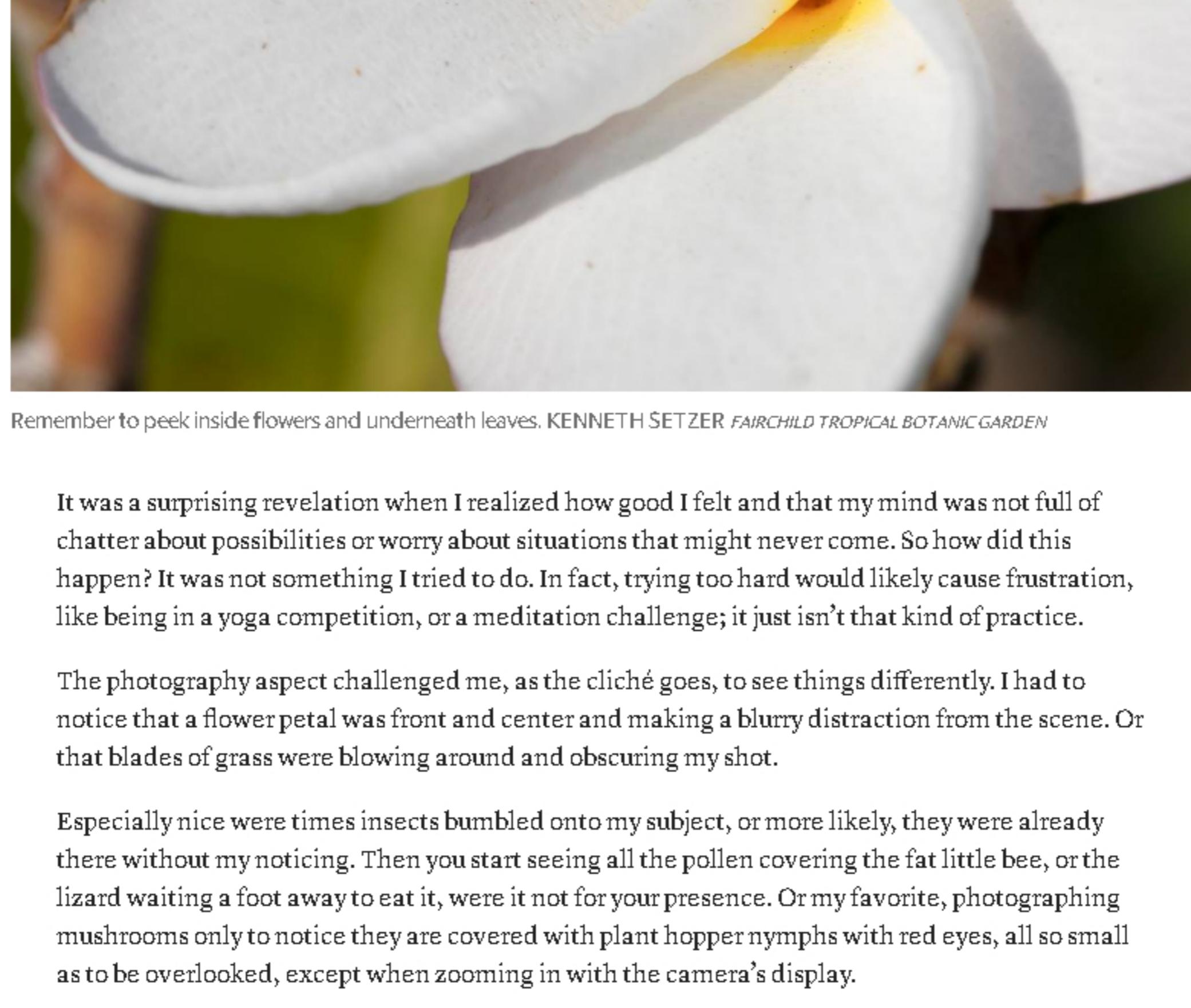
I've tried meditation, yoga and therapy and am a novice at best. I have, however, experienced what I think was mindfulness, and it was wonderful and effortless. It was a moment when I was not fretting about the future or regretting the past.

I saw the pattern that led me to this mindful state — it involved plants and photography. When I was out on the "hunt," I would be immersed in the search for subjects, either randomly exploring for interesting discoveries or looking for something specific. It took a few times before I realized that I had felt so very calm during the outing, while afterward I felt elated.

What was going on? I've written before about the healing qualities of nature and the harmful effects of nature deprivation, along with studies that bolster these claims. But this method happened rather by accident and it took me a while to realize I was feeling the benefits of nature immersion.

Out alone, stalking slowly with camera in hand, I had to occupy my mind with searching for little details — or big ones — and then how best to photograph them. This left little mental energy for worry, frustration, or creating the little scenarios in our heads that lead to stress.

There are many terms for this: In Japanese "*Shinrin yoku*," translating roughly to "forest bathing," is one. There's also the straightforward nature therapy, or horticulture therapy, or green immersion. Whatever you call it, the upshot is a clearer, calmer mind.

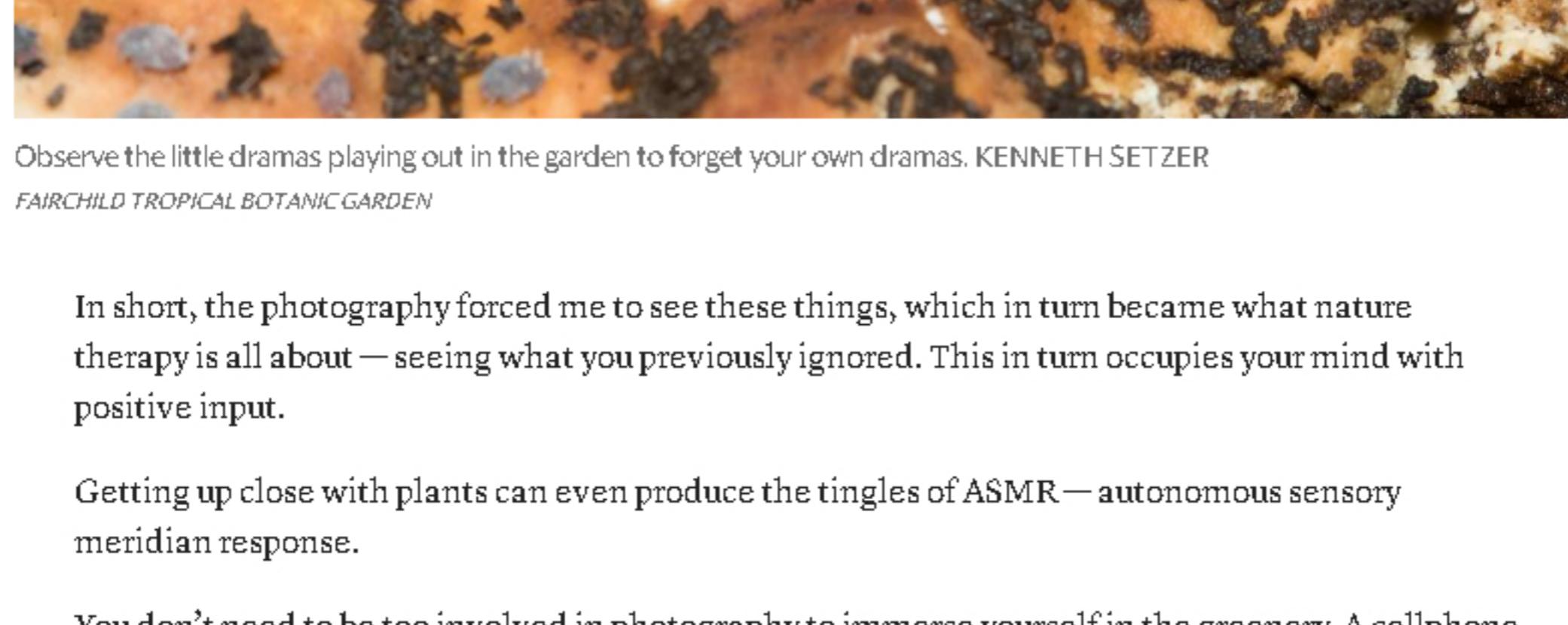


Remember to peek inside flowers and underneath leaves. KENNETH SETZER FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

It was a surprising revelation when I realized how good I felt and that my mind was not full of chatter about possibilities or worry about situations that might never come. So how did this happen? It was not something I tried to do. In fact, trying too hard would likely cause frustration, like being in a yoga competition, or a meditation challenge; it just isn't that kind of practice.

The photography aspect challenged me, as the cliché goes, to see things differently. I had to notice that a flower petal was front and center and making a blurry distraction from the scene. Or that blades of grass were blowing around and obscuring my shot.

Especially nice were times insects bumbled onto my subject, or more likely, they were already there without my noticing. Then you start seeing all the pollen covering the fat little bee, or the lizard waiting a foot away to eat it, were it not for your presence. Or my favorite, photographing mushrooms only to notice they are covered with plant hopper nymphs with red eyes, all so small as to be overlooked, except when zooming in with the camera's display.



Observe the little dramas playing out in the garden to forget your own dramas. KENNETH SETZER FAIRCHILD TROPICAL BOTANIC GARDEN

In short, the photography forced me to see these things, which in turn became what nature therapy is all about — seeing what you previously ignored. This in turn occupies your mind with positive input.

Getting up close with plants can even produce the tingles of ASMR — autonomous sensory meridian response.

You don't need to be too involved in photography to immerse yourself in the greenery. A cellphone camera can produce the exact same feeling and provide a record of your experience to boot! Just turn off the ringer and notifications first. You will start pondering the plants' lives rather than your own. Like how far their roots reach into the soil, or if they are connected to any underground networks of fungi.

Give it a try! Take your camera into your own yard to start, and start counting the petals on flowers, turning over rotten pieces of wood, and combing through the leaf litter. Take photos as you go along, and the process will lead you into present moment awareness, as it's called. Time will fly, and you will be amazed when you realize you were briefly free of worrying, fretting, or planning.

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