“THAT’S WHERE THE MAGIC HAPPENS. ALL YOUR IDEAS COME TO YOU WHEN YOU ARE OUT IN NATURE.”
Down to earth

DO YOU feel like you've been flying too high lately? The latest trend is all about planting your feet back on the ground.

WORDS: JODY SCOTT

Just two floors above the busy streets of SoHo, one of Manhattan's most expensive neighbourhoods, is a vast white loft filled with 197 cubic metres of nothing but deep, dark brown dirt. The New York Earth Room is an art installation created by Californian artist Walter De Maria in 1977, and it's been speculated this dirt that lies fallow in the heart of a concrete jungle must surely be worth a million dollars. But that's small change, really, compared to the value of the spacious, light-filled loft that houses it.

Each week for the past 37 years, the soil, weighing a total of 127,300 kilograms, has been lovingly raked, watered and weeded by a caretaker so it looks its best for the steady stream of visitors who come to inhale the musty, earthy aromas and look without touching. Although occasionally people do sneak a taste.

"I think we all have this deep-seated need to relate to the earth, some sort of ancestral relationship that we sometimes forget in the city and this can remind us," Bill Dilworth has said in a radio interview about the Earth Room, where he has been the caretaker for the past 25 years. "This is a truly radical thing that it is in Manhattan and in New York and it does not change. That in itself is radical because the nature of the city seems to be changing. So here we are unchanging and that is a great solace to many people. The longer it is here the more important it seems to be."

Dilworth believes the Earth Room's appeal is less about art and more about our "subconscious yearnings" for a connection to the earth. "Why else would some people reach down when they think no-one else is looking and pick up a little bit of earth to eat?" he says.

This urban shrine to dirt has possibly never been more relevant than it is now. While most health nuts are devoted to clean living, the latest trend, called earthing or grounding, actually involves getting down and dirty. All you need to do is simply slip off your shoes and feel the grass or sand between your toes.

The theory is that our skin is a powerful conductor of electricity. Earthing enthusiasts believe modern life and our constant exposure to mobile phones, computers, Wi-Fi and other sources of electromagnetic radiation result in a build-up of positive electrons or free radicals in our bodies. But standing or walking barefoot on the earth apparently enables you to discharge these excess electrical charges in your body and somehow absorb healing negative electrons from the ground. Furthermore, these negative electrons are claimed to be a potent source of anti-ageing antioxidants. Which suggests you can simply swap your Louboutins for longevity.

There's also a lengthy list of other supposed health benefits too, ranging from better sleep, lower stress levels, increased circulation, thinner blood, lower blood pressure, better cardiovascular health, slower ageing, less inflammation, a cure for jet lag and more. Unfortunately, though, double-blind, placebo-controlled, peer-reviewed scientific studies to support these claims are impossible to find.

But that doesn't appear to be posing a problem right now. Perhaps this is because we don't need a study to tell us that spending time in nature simply makes us feel good.

Last year, Spafanda’s annual forecast of the top 10 global spa and wellness trends included spa experiences that help combat "nature deficit disorder." "As modern humans become more cut off from nature, earthing specifically refers to the movement promoting direct contact with earth's electron-rich surface," Spafanda reports. "The premise is that grounding the body to the earth's surface stabilises natural electrical rhythms and reduces disease-causing inflammation."

Off-the-grid retreats such as California's Camp Grounded are popping up everywhere as adults jump at the chance to hand over our digital devices and be temporarily grounded.

Lola Berry is a yoga teacher, nutritionist, author of The 20/20 Diet and The 20/20 Cookbook and a self-described "biophilic" (nature lover) who dedicates time each day to exercising on the beach or meditating in the park. "That's where the magic happens. All your ideas and inspiration come to you when you are out in nature," Berry says.

"Afterwards, you feel balanced, grounded and present."

Berry says the simple process of standing barefoot in yoga's mountain pose can have a powerful effect on our stress levels. "It grounds you immediately and helps you to come back to the one thing that matters, this moment," she says.

To help counter jet lag, Berry advises heading outdoors, too. "If you've been on a long flight, whip your shoes off and get out into nature. Spend 20 minutes in the sunlight; it balances your melatonin and you'll have better sleep cycles," she says.

"And always try to watch the sun set that day to help reset your natural circadian rhythms."

Of course, there's no denying the feel-good factor of spending time in nature. However, as far as earthing goes, it appears the only "evidence" on offer comes from the very same people selling the gadgets you can use to ground yourself when getting outdoors is not an option. There are earthing mats to use at your desk. And to release static electricity while you sleep, there's even an earthing sheet lined with silver conductive fibres and a main wire that plugs into the earth port of a power point.

Peter Bowditch, a spokesperson for the Australian Skeptics, says earthing is basically pseudo science. "Grounding is just another thing on the pile of untested, unlikely and unworkable forms of alternative medicine," Bowditch says. "If the claim that people were healthier in the past because they ran around barefoot is true, then it is hard to explain why life expectancy now is so much greater than it was centuries ago."

So who to believe? Perhaps you just have to trust your own intuition and do what feels good. There are occasions when you will feel your best wearing very nice shoes. The same applies to bedding. After trialling both options, I've decided I sleep more soundly on Bedouin Society linen than an ugly beige and silver striped earthing sheet. On the other hand, I firmly believe a dip in the ocean can cure just about everything.

As original hippie Yoko Ono once tweeted: 'Walk with your bare feet, letting the earth energy circulate from your feet to your head and back again.' Just remember to keep an eye out for broken glass.