



# A Handcrafted Life

Creating a Sustainable Cottage Sanctuary

RIZZOLI  
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TIFFANY FRANCIS-BAKER



# Digital detoxing

"You have the power to take a break, switch off, and reset your relationship with technology."

FOR MANY OF US, BEING CONNECTED AND ENGAGED WITH THE digital world is a part of everyday life. It is no longer strange to shudder at the thought of being separated from our devices and this isn't our fault. Gadgets, apps, and social media platforms are designed to be addictive, so it will come as no surprise that many of us feel a strong attachment to them. According to research from the Nielsen Company, the average US adult spends around eleven hours each day listening to, watching, reading, or interacting with digital media in some form. While the digital world brings us plenty of joy, social connection, entertainment, and cultural value, few people can claim not to have felt the negative effects too.

So, whether you simply want to enjoy time offline without distractions, or you feel as if you have a behavioral addiction to your device, there are plenty of reasons to give digital detoxing a go. For one thing, research suggests that our constant need to keep checking emails, texts, and social media notifications is now leading to tech stress, while heavy technology use has been associated with an increased mental health risk, particularly among younger people. Devices are also responsible for disrupting our sleep quality and quantity, with studies showing that the use of social media in bed at night increases the likelihood of anxiety, insomnia, and shorter sleep duration. Throw in the issues surrounding productivity and distraction, comparison and self-esteem, as well as major FOMO (fear of missing out) when we see others' highlight reels on Instagram, and it's no wonder these new technologies have their downside.

### **When to take a break**

Not everyone needs to take a break from their devices, but if you are experiencing any of the following symptoms, you might enjoy a digital detox:

- ➔ You feel anxious or stressed when you can't find your cell phone.
- ➔ You feel compelled to check your cell phone every few minutes, even when you haven't received any notifications.
- ➔ You feel depressed, anxious, or angry after scrolling through social media feeds.
- ➔ You are preoccupied with how your posts are performing on social media.
- ➔ You are worried you'll miss out on something if you don't check your device regularly.
- ➔ Your use of technology is regularly disrupting your sleep pattern.
- ➔ You have trouble focusing on a task without being distracted by your cell phone.

If you experience any of these issues, you are certainly not alone. The good news is you have the power to take a break, switch off, and reset your relationship with technology.



# Botanical drawing

“Drawing is another way we can connect deeper with the world around us.”

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU PICKED UP A PENCIL AND sketchbook? For many of us, it may not have been since our school days, convinced we weren't good enough at drawing, leading us to seek other pursuits instead. But the truth is that anyone can draw, and the art of observation that develops with drawing is another way we can connect deeper with the world around us, especially when it comes to nature and landscapes. Learning to observe the way a flower opens in spring, how an apple rots in the fall, or even studying the feathers on a magpie in the garden are all special ways we can interact with nature and capture what we see in pen, ink, or paint. It doesn't matter what your final piece of art looks like, only that you spent time connecting with nature and the pencil in your hand. If you want to track your progress, you could keep a nature journal to document your sketches through the seasons. But don't allow pressure to put you off—the most important thing is to experiment and have fun without worrying about the end result.

# Getting started

Humans have been drawing pictures for thousands of years, so don't worry about getting it right straight away. Enjoy the process by getting back to basics and simply embracing the sensation of pencil moving over paper and creating something new. Find somewhere comfortable to sit, gather up your favorite pencils, and see which plants and flowers you are drawn to most. It could be the smallest weed or the most ostentatious flower—all are beautiful in their own unique way.

- Try not to focus on creating lifelike drawings if you don't find it enjoyable. Embrace the style of art you love, whether that's wobbly, organic designs or something completely abstract. The most important thing is observation and how your brain translates what it sees onto the blank page.
- Take the time to learn about the plants and flowers you are drawing. Not only will it help you appreciate their form and improve your work, but it will help you nurture a deeper connection with the natural world as a whole.
- Cut flowers are easy to transport, but they wilt and fade more quickly than plants left in the ground. Pop them in a vase of fresh water to extend their life. Potted plants retain their natural form, even when moved around.
- Establish a focal point from which you can start your drawing, then examine each of the shapes, junctions, and textures that emerge from that point. It's tempting to start with an outline of the whole subject, but that doesn't always lead to a satisfying piece of work.
- If pens and pencils aren't your medium of choice, switch to watercolor or acrylic paints, or branch into linocut printing, chalk, or charcoal. Drawing is a great foundation skill to develop, but there is no need to make botanical art a chore.
- Try not to compare your work to other people's, unless you are looking for tips to capture difficult parts of the plant. Your work is beautiful because it's unique—don't worry about what anyone else's looks like!
- Practice, practice, practice. The best way to develop your work is to embrace the mistakes, learn from the process, and keep pushing forward. It's amazing how quickly your skills will improve!





## Patchwork quilts

Patchwork quilts are deceptively simple to make and a wonderful way to use up scraps of fabric. They are also a lovely way to reuse sentimental fabrics such as loved ones' clothes; any fabric with a memory of its own can be sewn into a quilt and treasured forever as a family heirloom. Quilting is a mindful, methodical way to get started with sewing, and once you've mastered the traditional square design, you'll have the basic skills to think of more adventurous themes, including geometric shapes, historical scenes, and landscapes. Making a patchwork quilt requires two separate skills: patchworking and quilting. Patchworking is the art of sewing together pieces of fabric to form a pattern or block, while quilting is the act of sewing together the three layers that make up a quilt: the top, central wadding, and backing.







# Sew your own quilt

The following lap sized quilt will measure approximately 5 x 67 in. (13 x 170 cm), and is perfect for snuggling up with on the couch. It can also be made larger by adding extra rows or columns, and you can add a border around the squares, if preferred.

## You will need:

42 fabric squares, around 10 in. (25 cm) wide  
Cotton quilt wadding, at least 59 x 71 in. (150 x 180 cm). You can sew sections together if they are not in one complete piece  
39 in. (100 cm) fabric for the outer binding  
At least 55 x 63 in. (140 x 160 cm) backing fabric (again, you can sew sections together if they are not in one complete piece)

Cotton thread

Sewing machine

Pins

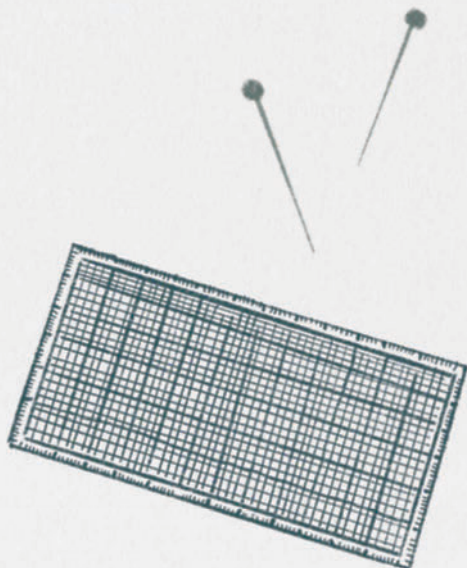
Rotary cutter

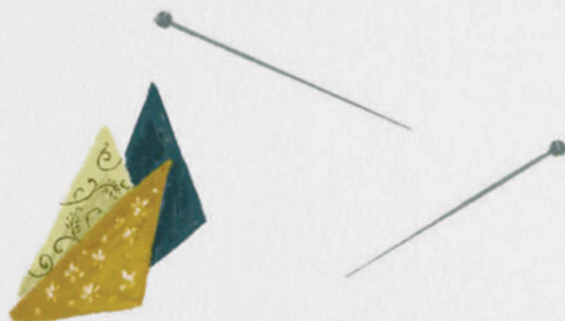
Self healing mat

Quilting ruler



1. Check that your squares are neatly cut with no jagged or frayed edges, then lay them out on a large table or clean floor to decide on your design. Arrange the squares in seven rows and six columns according to preference. If using a border, add one by measuring and cutting out strips of fabric and laying them alongside the outer edges of the squares. Once you are happy with the design, pin the squares together in rows.
2. Using your sewing machine, stitch the squares in each row together by sewing a line  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (5 mm) from the edge of each square (this is called the seam allowance).
3. Once the rows are complete, start stitching each row together until you have a completed quilt top layer. At this point, add the border if you have decided to use one.





4. Quilt the layers together using your sewing machine. You want to create a consistent stitch running all over the fabric that will pull the three layers together. Pin the layers together first, then either use a basic straight stitch or look online for more decorative ideas. Sandwich together the backing fabric, interior wadding, and top patchwork fabric, making sure the decorative sides are both facing outwards, away from the wadding inside.
5. Finally, finish the quilt by neatening up any scrappy edges using scissors. Then cut a narrow strip of fabric that will act as your binding, sealing the sides of the quilt together so you can't see inside the quilted layers. Sew the binding fabric along each of the four sides using a straight stitch  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (5 mm) from the edge, as with the individual squares.

### Tips

- ➔ Most craft stores sell cheap bundles of fabric called "fat quarters," which are perfect for patchworking.
- ➔ Take a photo of your layout before you start sewing or you may forget which squares go where.
- ➔ If cutting your own squares out of fabric, use a cardboard template to draw around rather than measuring every time. It will produce a more consistent shape and save you a lot of hassle!
- ➔ If you don't enjoy pinning, you could invest in water-soluble glue to stick squares together, which will then dissolve in the wash.
- ➔ Quilting is a very forgiving craft, so don't worry if you make a few mistakes or measure up a bit wrong. It's all part of the process and won't make the quilt any less beautiful!





# Journaling

"Indulge in some much-needed self-care time, and see which thoughts spill out of your pen and onto the page."

AS CHILDREN, MANY OF US WILL HAVE BEEN FAMILIAR WITH THE concept of a secret diary. A place to share our most private thoughts, sort through our shifting emotions, and find a few moments of clarity. Complete with a cheap padlock we were *certain* nobody could break through. The padlock may have disappeared, but keeping a diary or journal is still just as important for our adult minds as it was back then. Keeping a journal is a form of private therapy, proven to help reduce stress, improve immune function, keep our memory sharp, boost our mood, and strengthen our emotional functions. Whether we're just recording the events and emotions of the day, or writing a novel's worth of words every night, there is no right or wrong way to keep a journal. It doesn't matter if you have five minutes to spare or two hours; just grab a cup of tea or coffee, indulge in some much-needed self-care time, and see which thoughts spill out of your pen and onto the page. Don't worry about investing in an expensive notebook if you don't want to—a simple, spiral-bound one from the dollar store will do just fine, along with a cheap pen or pencil. Magic!





# Getting started

Journaling is all about giving yourself the time and space to explore your own thoughts. There is no wrong way to journal; the most important things are to find a way to fit it into your schedule and keep it enjoyable. Try not to set yourself unrealistic expectations, but enjoy making time for yourself and see where the pen and paper take you. Remember this is a simple, flexible, and accessible form of self care. You deserve to take a few minutes for yourself when you can.

## Building habits

→ Don't get bogged down with being consistent or motivated all the time. Like all habits, journaling can take a while to work into your regular routine, and there's nothing worse than feeling guilty if you don't manage to pick up a pen every day. We all lead busy lives, so do what you can, and once you start seeing the benefits it'll be easier to keep it going.

## Start small

→ If a blank page is too intimidating, start small. Write a single line of thought, an emotion of the day, or even something mundane like what you had for breakfast. It all helps to move your brain cogs into the right gear.

## Freewriting

→ Another effective journaling technique is freewriting. The idea is to sit down every day and fill three pages in your notebook without worrying about the words you're actually writing. This stream of consciousness style is said to help clear creative blocks and remove the pressure of writing perfect prose every time. Instead, you can simply declutter your brain of thoughts in the hope that it might reveal something new.

## Journaling prompts

Not sure where to begin on your journaling journey? Start with these writing prompts. They're a great way to trigger new ideas and get your pen flowing over the paper. Recognize how the prompts make you feel, allow yourself to explore those thoughts, and go forward from there.

- Reflect on your life so far and explore what draws you to the cottage's life. What are you seeking, and how do you think you might find it?
- In Roman mythology, Janus was the two-faced god of beginnings and endings, doorways and passages. What lessons from the past can you take forward into the future? And which elements would you like to let go of?
- They say time can heal the deepest wounds and help us see things in ways we couldn't before. What do you know to be true now that you didn't know a year ago?
- How do you feel today, and how do you *want* to feel today? Gently explore why there might be a difference between the two. How can they be more aligned in future?





# Creative writing

“There is no limit to what you can produce with the humble pen and paper.”

THE BEAUTY OF CREATIVE WRITING IS HOW INFINITELY VARIED IT can be. From poetry and songwriting to novels, plays, scripts, short stories, blogs, journalism, zines, and podcasts, there is no limit to what you can produce with the humble pen and paper, or word processor. Studies have shown just how beneficial creative writing is for our wellbeing, whether it's building confidence in ourselves and enabling self expression, boosting our imaginations, clarifying our thoughts, improving our linguistic skills, encouraging empathy and communication, or even improving our mental and emotional health. Writing has even been proven to alleviate stress levels and ward off intrusive, anxious thoughts. But you don't have to be a professional to reap the rewards of a creative writing practice. Nurturing a simple writing habit, no matter how much you write or who ends up reading it, is a great way to get in touch with your creativity and dust off the corners of your mind you may have forgotten about.





# Creative writing prompts

Prompts are a great way to get your brain whirring and ideas flowing, especially when it comes to creative writing. They can take any form: you could flick through a newspaper, skim through the pages of your favorite book, or even jot down ideas from the radio. Simply use the prompt to generate new ideas, and see what happens when you put pen to paper. Take a look at the list below for some prompts to get you started:

- You are a space tourist traveling alone to the International Space Station, which will keep you away from home for three years. You are looking back at the pale blue dot of planet Earth and decide to write a letter. Who is it for, and what does it say?
- Three famous acquaintances have joined you round the table for supper. Who are they and what happens?
- A blackbird takes shelter in your garden over winter. Each day it brings a piece of gold and leaves it as a gift on the window frame. What do you do?
- Naturalists once believed that when migratory birds disappeared in fall, they were hibernating at the bottom of muddy ponds. Imagine you are one of these naturalists, and write a speech designed to convince your peers of your theory.
- Imagine climbing a pine tree in midwinter. What can you see, smell, hear, and taste? What species do you find? What do you discover at the top?
- You hear a magic flute while walking in the forest and decide to follow the sound. Where does it lead you? How does the journey make you feel?

# Writing poetry

Poetry is one of the easiest ways to let loose with your pen, simply because there are so many forms it can take. Whether you love rhyming sonnets, haikus, or sprawling free verse, have fun with the written word, and don't worry about sticking to the rules.

## **Read lots of poetry**

As with all creative practices, the best way to start forming your own ideas is to find inspiration in the work of others. Not only is reading poetry an enjoyable hobby, it will fuel your subconscious and get your own mind whirring into action.

## **Start small**

Don't worry about writing epic, page-long poems if you're new to the practice. Start by playing around with short-form poems such as the haiku, or, if you love rhyming poems, you could start by writing a limerick.

## **Begin anywhere**

Don't worry about the first line if it's not coming to you organically. Start by scribbling all your ideas down on the page and worry about their placement later. You'll be surprised at how quickly your poem will form itself.

## **Embrace the thesaurus and dictionary**

There's no shame in using tools like these to expand your vocabulary and help you shape your lines. We can't know all the words all the time!

## **If you're stuck for an idea, try telling a story with your poem**

Edgar Allan Poe was great at this, as his famous poem *The Raven* demonstrates. Poems don't have to be about abstract concepts; they can simply be a fun, rhythmic way to tell a story.

## **Follow your passions**

Poets, just like other artists, all communicate about different subjects. Some write about political topics, social injustice, climate change, and gender equality, while others prefer to write simply about the flowers in their garden or the moon in the sky. All subjects are valid; the most important thing is to be authentic to yourself and write what you feel truly passionate about, so try not to compare your work to others.



