

Get fit the natural way

Want to burn off some calories but can't afford the gym? **PAUL PROWSE** has the answer – a fitness programme that helps the environment

HATE going to the gym. It's not that I'm lazy or averse to exercise, but there's something about the gym that just leaves me cold. It could be the monotonous nature of exercise machines, the terrible music or maybe the sight of middle-aged men in spandex. Whatever it is, being cooped up in that sweaty fluorescent tomb is not my idea of fun.

But then, staying in shape is important, right? So, I'm only too happy to try out an alternative form of exercise – one that gets the blood pumping, embraces the great outdoors and helps the natural environment as well. Kill three birds by losing one stone, so to speak.

Nature's Gym, run by Lewisham council, takes place in parks and nature reserves and aims to boost health and fitness through gardening-style jobs that also improve the environment.

So, instead of mindlessly running on a treadmill or lifting weights, you burn off the calories by doing something useful.

And don't dismiss it just because it doesn't involve fancy trainers or a pedometer. Trust me – a morning spent clearing away undergrowth or planting hedgerows is as big a cardiovascular workout as anything offered by a regular gym.

The exercise element of the sessions is taken seriously, with a warm-up taking place at the start,

along with instructions on how to use the gardening equipment in a safe manner (which I'm grateful for).

Warmed-up and safety-conscious, we get to work. You soon get a glow of satisfaction from knowing that you're burning calories and doing something genuinely constructive – whether it's clearing a pond, planting a fresh row of trees or helping to build a birdhouse.

"We manage to achieve quite a lot," says group leader Jess Kyle. "We've clocked up something in the region of 5,000 volunteer hours over the last two-and-a-half years. But the social aspect is just as important as the environmental work."

The people I meet are indeed a sociable bunch, ranging from professionals taking the opportunity to get out of the office to pensioners wanting to contribute to the community. Carole Flowerday used to work for a City law firm. After leaving her job, she fancied taking up some voluntary activity.

"I'd had enough of sitting at a desk all day," she says. "So I thought this would be good exercise. It's great spending time outside with nice people, and you discover all sorts of areas in Lewisham you never knew existed."

More than 200 volunteers have taken part in the Nature's Gym scheme since it was launched in 2008, with numbers per session tending to vary between 15 and 25. Many are regulars who have done a variety of



LIFTING: Paul Prowse grapples with a pallet during his Nature's Gym session

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different volunteering projects – Carole has been volunteering for three years now, but she points out that she's just "a newbie" compared with others.

Will Clapham, who is 79, has been doing this sort of voluntary conservation work since 1981. Though he's old enough to be my grandfather, he does twice as much work as me in half the time, sympathetically eyeing my increasingly feeble efforts to dig holes in which to plant a new hedgerow.

"It's just good to be out in the open, doing something useful," he says. "I think it's even more important to take care of your open spaces when you live in an urban area."

"We've done a lot of work in school gardens, and it's nice knowing that you've done your bit to help children have green spaces to play in."

Anyone is welcome to join Nature's Gym. You certainly don't need to be a gardening expert or fitness fanatic. The sessions are free and all the necessary tools and equipment are provided (plus complimentary tea and biscuits for a well-earned break halfway through the session).

You work at your own pace and choose what you want to do from a range of tasks on offer.

For example, if you get fed up with gardening you might try your hand at a spot of DIY. During the session I attended, several people were busy building a "bug hotel" – a wooden

construction specially designed to provide a friendly home to everything from bees to frogs. I did what I could to assist, but my woodwork skills were such that any bug hotel I helped build would be more like a dilapidated shack than the Ritz.

Still, everyone does what they can. And when you're out in the fresh air, muscles pleasantly aching from a hard morning's work and a warm mug of tea in your hand, that's all that matters.

● Nature's Gym sessions take place every Thursday, and once a month on a Saturday from 11am-2pm. Visit www.lewisham.gov.uk for more details.



BARROW BOY: Paul pushes tools 37462MA06

HAMMER BLOW: Paul looks confident before his attempts to build a bug hotel

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