



Mini review

## Green prescriptions: an innovative approach to human health from a planetary health perspective

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### ABSTRACT

Green prescriptions represent an innovative therapeutic approach that integrates contact with nature into care pathways, addressing the growing disconnection from natural environments in contemporary societies. This mini-review presents a mapping of green prescriptions within the One Health and Planetary Health paradigms, exploring their therapeutic potential in managing chronic diseases and promoting psychophysical well-being. The mini-review analyzes international scientific evidence on the benefits of green prescriptions, with particular focus on Italian experience and programs implemented across European, American, and Oceanic countries. Pilot projects, research initiatives, and clinical protocols are examined to evaluate the effectiveness, appropriateness, and sustainability of green prescriptions. International meta-analyses support the effectiveness of green prescriptions in managing chronic pathologies characterized by systemic chronic inflammation, including diabetes, obesity, hypertension, and mental disorders. Documented benefits include improvements in cardio-metabolic health, stress reduction, decreased anxiety and depression, increased physical activity, and enhanced social well-being. The Italian experience, led by projects from the University of Valle d'Aosta and the TeFFIt Network, a multidisciplinary network focused on green prescriptions, demonstrates the feasibility of integrating green prescriptions into the National Health System. Green prescriptions represent a paradigmatic shift toward a holistic approach to health that recognizes the interconnection between human and environmental well-being. Their implementation requires specialized training for healthcare providers, standardization of practices, and interdisciplinary collaboration. The potential of green prescriptions extends beyond individual therapy, positioning them as a tool for promoting planetary health and healthcare system sustainability.

### Keywords

Green prescriptions, One health, Planetary health, Integrative medicine, Therapeutic nature, Public health.

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## ABSTRACT in ITALIANO

Le *green prescriptions* rappresentano un approccio terapeutico innovativo che integra il contatto con la natura nei percorsi di cura, rispondendo alla crescente disconnessione dagli ambienti naturali nelle società contemporanee. Questa mini-review propone una mappatura delle *green prescriptions* all'interno dei paradigmi One Health e Planetary Health, esplorandone il potenziale terapeutico nella gestione delle patologie croniche e nella promozione del benessere psicofisico. Questa mini-review analizza le evidenze scientifiche internazionali sui benefici delle *green prescriptions*, con particolare attenzione all'esperienza italiana e ai programmi implementati in Paesi europei, americani e oceanici. Vengono esaminati progetti pilota, iniziative di ricerca e protocolli clinici per valutarne efficacia, appropriatezza e sostenibilità. Le meta-analisi internazionali supportano l'efficacia delle *green prescriptions* nella gestione di patologie croniche caratterizzate da infiammazione sistemica cronica, tra cui diabete, obesità, ipertensione e disturbi mentali. Tra i benefici documentati si evidenziano miglioramenti della salute cardiometabolica, riduzione dello stress, diminuzione dell'ansia e della depressione, incremento dell'attività fisica e miglioramento del benessere sociale. L'esperienza italiana, guidata da progetti dell'Università della Valle d'Aosta e dalla rete TeFFIt, una rete multidisciplinare dedicata alle *green prescriptions*, dimostra la fattibilità dell'integrazione di tali interventi nel Servizio Sanitario Nazionale. Le *green prescriptions* rappresentano un cambiamento paradigmatico verso un approccio olistico alla salute che riconosce l'interconnessione tra benessere umano e ambientale. La loro implementazione richiede una formazione specialistica per i professionisti sanitari, la standardizzazione delle pratiche e la collaborazione interdisciplinare. Il potenziale delle *green prescriptions* va oltre la terapia individuale, configurandosi come uno strumento per promuovere la salute planetaria e la sostenibilità dei sistemi sanitari.

### Parole chiave

Psicoterapia infantile, Approccio fenomenologico, Terapia della Gestalt, Co-terapia, Embodiment.

## INTRODUCTION

In today's scientific landscape, the relationship between human health and natural ecosystems is receiving increasing attention, supported by innovative therapeutic tools such as “green prescriptions” that are integrated into modern approaches according to the One Health and Planetary Health paradigms [1, 2], and the growing awareness of the importance for psychophysical well-being of recovering the connection with natural environments from which contemporary society has progressively distanced itself in recent years [3-5]. Thanks to health professionals' ability to “prescribe” experiences in nature as part of a broader therapeutic path, we are witnessing a paradigm shift in the approach to treatment [6]. This research contribution aims to provide an initial mapping of green prescriptions, with a particular focus on the concept of nearby nature, understood as nature easily accessible and integrated into daily life, representing both an opportunity to improve individual health and a step toward a more integrated approach to global health [5], framed within a holistic perspective that encompasses physical, psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions, without forgetting its theoretical foundations. Indeed, the study of green prescriptions is grounded in the innate human connection with the natural world—what E.O. Wilson defined in 1984 as

biophilia [4]—which continues to play a vital role in the psychophysical balance of human beings, even in highly urbanized societies [5]. Green prescriptions thus emerge not only as a novel therapeutic approach but also as a potential bridge toward a conception of health that fully acknowledges the bond between human beings and the ecological context in which they live [7].

## METHODOLOGY

This contribution is a narrative mini-review of the scientific and grey literature on green prescriptions. Literature searches were conducted in PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar, using search terms including “green prescriptions,” “nature prescriptions,” “nature-based interventions,” “social prescribing,” “forest therapy,” “One Health,” and “Planetary Health,” in both English and Italian, without date restrictions. Eligible sources included peer-reviewed original articles, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses. Additionally, non-peer-reviewed materials—such as institutional reports, national program documentation, conference proceedings, and project websites—were included when peer-reviewed evidence was limited or unavailable, given the emerging nature of this field and the substantial heterogeneity of green prescription implementation across

national contexts. Peer-reviewed sources were prioritized throughout the review; non-peer-reviewed materials were used to document ongoing programs, pilot projects, and policy developments not yet represented in the indexed scientific literature. The absence of a systematic protocol and the inclusion of grey literature constitute acknowledged limitations of the present review, discussed further in the Limitations.

## GREEN PRESCRIPTIONS

Green Prescriptions, also known as ecological or natural prescriptions, represent an innovative approach to health that seeks to enhance an individual's psycho-physical well-being through contact with nature. Green Prescriptions are designed to address health and care needs, particularly those related to chronic diseases (e.g., diabetes, obesity, hypertension, depression, asthma, autoimmune disorders), which often stem from low-grade systemic chronic inflammation caused by environmental factors and lifestyle [8]. This lifestyle is frequently characterized by physical inactivity, poor diet, excessive hygiene, reduced contact with animals and natural soils, exposure to environmental and industrial toxins, nighttime exposure to blue light, and psychological stress [8, 9]. The physical benefits investigated to date in international studies on green prescriptions include cardiometabolic health, physical activity, and inflammation. The number of studies is insufficient to highlight benefits for orthopedic conditions, chronic pain, or burnout [10, 11]. Accessible local green spaces are associated with improved mental health, encourage active behaviors and social interaction, increase self-esteem, and reduce mental distress such as stress, depression, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness [10, 12]. The most recent international meta-analyses [11, 13] support the idea that incorporating nature-based social prescribing interventions into mental health care plans can be a fundamental and effective complement to traditional therapies. Italian research aligns with the international landscape, critically examining how green prescriptions may prove effective, appropriate, feasible, accessible, and sustainable in its context, both from the perspective of community well-being (people, animals, ecosystems) and in terms of diagnostic and treatment plans. The medical

doctor plays an important role in becoming sensitive to and implementing green prescriptions, thereby effectively addressing patients' holistic needs while also contributing to the sustainability of National Health Service resources and products [9, 12]. The intriguing aspect of green prescriptions lies in their holistic nature, which makes them complementary to traditional therapeutic pathways. They do not aim to replace medical care, but to integrate it with a preventive and health-promoting approach. Ultimately, green prescriptions represent a paradigm shift in the understanding of health, highlighting the therapeutic power of nature and promoting a healthier, more sustainable lifestyle. In Italy, this practice is gaining increasing popularity, supported by various initiatives and pilot projects. Several research and practice groups are working to foster collaboration between medical doctors and green care practitioners for prescribing outdoor activities in natural settings. At the international level, green prescriptions are finding fertile ground in many countries as well.

## GREEN PRESCRIPTIONS IN ITALY

In Italy, Green Prescriptions (GPs) are garnering increasing scholarly and clinical interest as an innovative framework for health promotion through nature-based contact [14, 15]. Numerous initiatives, professional networks, and research groups are contributing to the dissemination and implementation of this approach within the national healthcare landscape. A seminal development in this field is the project "*Green Prescriptions in a One Health/Planetary Health Perspective*", a collaborative effort between GREEN LEAF (the Laboratory of Affective Ecology at the University of Valle d'Aosta) and the experimental observation center "Il Bosco di Puck" [14]. This initiative has fostered a community of practice involving healthcare professionals, researchers, and citizens, aimed at investigating and applying GPs through an integrated lens that encompasses human, animal, and environmental health. In October 2023, the Green Leaf Center, in partnership with ISDE (International Society of Doctors for the Environment) and the Medical Association of Valle d'Aosta, convened the symposium "*Approccio al concetto di salute planetaria e il potenziale delle Foreste Valdostane*" [16].

Concurrently, the TeFFIt Network (*Terapie Forestali in Foreste Italiane* – Forest Therapies in Italian Forests) has developed standardized protocols for nature-based interventions, including forest immersion, animal-assisted forest therapies, and physical activities in natural settings. TeFFIt has further contributed to the field by drafting clinical guidelines for medical prescriptions and by integrating nature-based interventions into community services, such as day centers, schools, and residential facilities. Notably, as early as 2022, TeFFIt launched a Continuing Medical Education (CME) course on forest immersion, accredited by the Medical Association of Arezzo [15, 16]. A further milestone in the standardization of Italian GPs is represented by the *Protocollo condiviso per le Prescrizioni Verdi* (Shared Protocol for Green Prescriptions), published on the [prescrizioniverdi.it](http://prescrizioniverdi.it) website in January 2026, which provides operational guidelines for healthcare professionals on how to prescribe, monitor, and evaluate nature-based interventions within clinical pathways [17, 18].

The modalities for prescribing GPs in Italy are heterogeneous and highly adaptable to patient-specific needs. Healthcare providers may prescribe structured or self-regulated interventions, delivered individually or in groups, with or without professional guidance, taking into account clinical conditions, patient preferences, and specific environmental characteristics. Crucially, prescriptions should incorporate activities designed to enhance nature connectedness—such as appreciation, stewardship, and ecological restoration—as the scientific literature underscores a robust correlation between the degree of nature connection and physical [19] and psychological [20] health outcomes. Research conducted in northeastern Italy further confirms that the naturalness of landscape structure positively influences children’s connectedness to nature, suggesting that the qualitative characteristics of natural environments are a relevant variable in GP design [21]. A longitudinal study on green prescriptions in Italy has also demonstrated that ecosystem structure can significantly affect health outcomes, reinforcing the need for careful environmental selection in GP protocols [22, 23].

In the domain of sustainable architecture, the *Fabbrica dell’Aria* represents a pioneering project developed by PNAT—an academic spin-off of the University of Florence comprising plant scientists and archi-

texts, co-founded by neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso—that applies principles of plant neurobiology to devise design solutions to enhance indoor air quality. This approach leverages plant intelligence and biophilic design, aligning with the One Health vision to redefine the relationship between nature and the built environment, thereby promoting healthier, more symbiotic urban spaces [24]. Furthermore, the “*Spighe Verdi*” (Green Ears) program, promoted by FEE Italy (Foundation for Environmental Education), recognizes rural municipalities that implement sustainable development practices, incentivizing local administrations to integrate nature-based health promotion into territorial policies and fostering environments conducive to citizen well-being [25].

Despite burgeoning interest, the systematic adoption of GPs in Italy faces several challenges, including the need for specialized training for healthcare professionals, the standardization of clinical practices, and rigorous evaluation of intervention efficacy. Nevertheless, current Italian initiatives demonstrate a substantial commitment toward integrating nature-based solutions into the national healthcare system, promoting a holistic health paradigm that acknowledges the fundamental interdependence between humanity and the natural world.

## GREEN PRESCRIPTIONS AROUND THE WORLD

In Scotland, the initiative “Medical Prescriptions for Nature” has been pioneering in the Shetland Islands since 2018, promoted by general practitioners in collaboration with the National Health Service (NHS) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Physicians prescribe activities such as walks, gardening, and outdoor group activities as an integral part of therapeutic plans for patients with anxiety, depression, and stress-related urban disorders [26]. Documented benefits include reduced stress, improved mood, stronger connection with nature, and greater social cohesion, along with a lower reliance on medication. The success of the initiative led to the program’s expansion to Edinburgh in 2020 and to the Orkney Islands in 2024 [26, 27]. Program reports from Scotland showed that 74% of patients reported benefits from their prescriptions, and 91% of healthcare professionals stated they would continue prescribing natural remedies [28, 29].

Finland launched in 2021 the “Nature Step to Health” program as part of the Lahti Regional Health and Environment Programme 2022-2032, the result of collaboration between the Päijät-Häme Wellbeing Services, the city of Lahti (European Green Capital 2021), and the Lahti University Campus [30]. The program also involves the University of Helsinki, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, the Finnish Environment Institute, the Natural Resources Institute Finland, and WWF Finland [30, 31]. The initiative pursues five macro-objectives: prevention of non-communicable diseases, improvement of biodiversity, climate change mitigation and adaptation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and cost-effectiveness [30]. These objectives are pursued through four transversal activities: healthy and sustainable diets; physical activity and active mobility; healthy living in a sustainable environment; and connection with natural settings [30, 31]. The program focuses on preventing obesity and chronic diseases through increased physical activity, balanced diets, and stronger contact with nature [30]. In 2022, the “Planetary Prescription” campaign monitored the well-being of five participants by providing personalized green prescriptions, including barefoot walks in forests, plant-based diets, and gardening. The campaign reached over three million people in Finland and millions worldwide [30, 31].

In Switzerland, the Pro Senectute Therapeutic Day Center in Balerna developed the “Sensory Garden,” a therapeutic space specifically designed for elderly people with cognitive impairments such as Alzheimer’s and mobility difficulties [32]. The garden integrates accessible pathways, safe ramps, rest areas, aromatic gardens, and targeted therapeutic elements. This approach fosters sensory stimulation, promotes autonomy and safety, improves emotional well-being, and enables specific therapeutic activities that reduce anxiety and aggression, facilitating integration with the natural environment.

In the United States, the non-profit Park Rx America promotes park visits as prescriptions to counter chronic diseases and improve quality of life [33]. The Children & Nature Network, founded by Richard Louv, is dedicated to connecting children with nature for both physical and mental benefits, offering resources, research, and programs to encourage families and communities to spend more time outdoors [33]. The program “Walk with a Doc” combines health

and movement through free walks led by local medical doctors, with numerous active chapters across Ohio [34, 35].

Australia has developed the global concept of “Healthy Parks, Healthy People” (HPHP) through Parks Victoria, later adopted in Europe by the Europarc Federation [36-38]. This approach emphasizes that parks are essential to human health and well-being [15, 39]. Australia has created specific programs such as BrainLink for people with brain disorders, AMAZE for individuals with autism, and the Werribee Park Program for refugees and migrants [38-41]. Many European countries have adopted the HPHP approach as part of public health strategies [38]. In Italy, the project “*Natura è Benessere*” (NèB), supported by CURSA (University Consortium for Socio-Economic and Environmental Research), is based on HPHP principles and aims to spread awareness of nature’s importance for children’s health [42]. Similar experiences have been developed in Asia, Africa, and the United States [15, 36].

In Belgium, Dr. Ann Sterckx, ecopsychologist and Belgian representative of the International Ecopsychology Society, and director of the Earth Wise Education School of Ecopsychology, conducted her doctoral research on integrated nature-based interventions aimed at restoring biodiversity and beauty around healthcare facilities, so that patients could then be brought into these rehabilitated natural settings [43]. Her research was born from the realization that, in Belgium and beyond, incorporating nature into activities related to health and well-being gained popularity, particularly after COVID-19, when many psychologists and coaches started holding sessions outdoors, and some physicians began prescribing walks to their patients [15, 43]. Yet many of these professionals were not specifically trained to guide individuals in nature, nor did they have in-depth knowledge of selecting the most suitable environments for patients, the expected benefits, or the potential risks. In most cases, nature was simply “used” as a healthy backdrop, without fostering a deeper connection with the natural world [43]. To facilitate the implementation of such interventions, Dr. Sterckx interviewed a diverse sample of 16 healthcare professionals—8 general practitioners and 8 psychologists—about their self-care practices, their relationship with nature, and how they integrate these elements into their professional roles. The combined interview and questionnaire

approach deepened participants' awareness of nature's importance and could serve as a potential tool for increasing their "awareness of nature-connected care" [15, 43].

In Chile, Claudio Antonio Pereira Salazar – PhD in Communication, Social Change and Development, Chilean representative of the International Ecopsychology Society, and Director of the Ecopsychology Institute *Koru Transformación* – has described the developments in his country regarding green prescriptions and the involvement of the Chilean School of Ecopsychology in the project [44]. The National Program "Nature for Your Health" is a government initiative aimed at promoting emotional well-being and mental health through reconnection with the natural environment [12, 44]. Recently launched by the Ministries of Agriculture, Environment, and Health, the program focuses on sensory and experiential reconnection with nature in protected areas, urban and rural green spaces, health centers, educational institutions, and community spaces. It is addressed to the entire population, with particular attention to those seeking to improve their health, and it also aims to generate actions to care for ecosystems [2, 44]. The program draws inspiration from the experience of the National Forestry Corporation (CONAF) in implementing universal accessibility to nature and in creating forest bathing areas within the protected wilderness areas it manages [44]. Four interdisciplinary work areas are envisioned: democratizing access to nature with emphasis on vulnerable segments of the population; promoting forest bathing and land-connection practices inspired by Amerindian indigenous cultures; educating children and adolescents in full contact with nature to address Nature Deficit Disorder; and collaborating with public and private sectors to develop more sustainable urban centers. This project is supported by a cooperation agreement between *Koru Transformación*, CONAF, and the Corporation *Schools for Ecosocial Regeneration*, and will include training programs for facilitators of nature-based well-being experiences [2, 44].

## Limitations

Several limitations of the present mini-review should be acknowledged. First, this work adopts a narrative rather than a systematic methodology, which introduces potential selection bias in the literature considered. Second, the inclusion of non-peer-reviewed

materials—while necessary given the emerging and heterogeneous nature of green prescription programs internationally—limits the overall level of evidence. Third, the constructs central to the field, such as nature connectedness and biophilia, remain difficult to measure consistently, and the limited number of controlled trials makes it challenging to assess outcomes across different populations and settings. Fourth, the review does not include a formal quality assessment of included studies. Future research should prioritize randomized controlled trials, longitudinal designs, and cross-national comparative studies to strengthen the evidence base for green prescriptions as a public health intervention.

## CONCLUSIONS

Green Prescriptions emerge as an innovative tool for therapeutic integration, connecting individual health, social bonds, and environmental sustainability. International literature and early Italian evidence confirm the potential of GPs to address chronic diseases and support mental health. Today, we can rethink healthcare models in a preventive and relational light. There is still a need to systematize practices, train professionals, and define shared guidelines to consolidate their effectiveness and safety—a direction now being actively pursued in Italy with the publication of the first shared national protocol for green prescriptions [18]. GPs do not replace traditional clinical pathways but enrich them with an ecological and experiential perspective, restoring nature to its role as co-therapist. In this sense, they represent a paradigm shift that, within the Planetary Health framework, redefines care as an interconnected process among individuals, communities, and ecosystems.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Stefano Orlando: Conceptualization, Visualization, and Writing – original draft. Marcella Danon: Formal analysis and Subject Matter Expertise. Francesco Marino: Translation and Technical editing. Filippo Bucciarelli: Literature Search and Data Curation. Anna Di Leva: Critical Revision and Synthesis. Francesca Morelli: Validation and Table/Figure Preparation. Maura Perrone: Writing – review & editing.

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