

Time for Plants to Go to School!

Not since Mary took her lamb to school has there been such an influx of other species to the local schoolhouse. From coast to coast over the past several years there has been a concerted effort by communities to connect their school children to the wider world in which they live.

One way in which this has been done is by planting school gardens. You have probably read of the efforts of famous chefs introducing local food to young scholars through growing good food at school sites for use in the cafeterias.

Those of us with long, pre-plastic memories may remember leaving our first grade classrooms with a sprouted seed in a soggy paper Dixie cup. Small children have an affinity for seeds and bugs and bits of earth and this interest needs to be cultivated before they outgrow curiosity and emerge into the world of junk food and TV.

Tasty carrots are not the only incentive for planting a school garden. Children are fascinated by birds and butterflies and enjoy watching as an empty space along side their school building becomes a habitat for small living creatures. One such habitat exists in nearby Williamsburg at Stonehouse Elementary School where an entire courtyard has been transformed into a Schoolyard Habitat featuring native plants.

This is not a “don’t-touch” showplace, but a hands-on project involving parents, teachers and lots of children. Community member, naturalist, and Virginia Native Plant Society veteran Jan Newton has provided the direction, inspiration, planning and hard work for this ongoing project. Photographs, most taken by Jan, detail the arrival of butterflies and the nurturing of the egg to caterpillar to butterfly process.

There have been lesson plans developed by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries under the auspices of their project WILD that enable teachers to guide students into the research of the native plants and animals, an endeavor that will help them understand the interdependence and interconnectedness of an ecological habitat.

Native plants surround us and are so familiar they are just ‘there’ so we really don’t see them or understand how important they are to the health of the animals that have evolved along with them in a specific region. Because they have evolved together, their berries may be the ideal food for the local birds. There has been a study done recently to explore why some cardinals were losing their brilliant red coloring and fading to a so-so orangey red. Accustomed to dine on the berries of the native holly, when their diet changed to a reliance on the berries of imported holly species the cardinals became malnourished. The possible explanation is that only the native holly had berries sufficiently rich in fat content to keep their feathers flourishingly red! Amazing isn’t it how important are the details. A rose may be a rose, but a holly is not always a holly?

If you have butterflies you probably have nearby tulip poplar or paw-paw trees and plants of butterfly weed, rudbeckia, coneflower, goldenrod, asters, sunflowers and Joe-Pye weed. For a long list of Virginia’s native plants you can go to <http://vnps.org/home>.

To connect children to nature may be a challenge, but a fun one and there is a wealth of help available. If you are adept at pulling information from cyberspace there are endless possibilities. For people who prefer to turn pages there are how-to guides published for schoolyard learning. They are compiled by the National Wildlife Federation, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service among others. Virginia Tech has “The MINTS Book” – model inquiries into nature in the schoolyard: an inquiry field guide [k-12] Va. Tech Museum of Natural History. www.outreach.geos.vt.edu/programs/programs.html

It isn't only the children and butterflies that benefit. A native garden enhances the nectar supply available to bees and other pollinating insects throughout the neighborhood! The figures and percentages vary according to the pattern of the research, but the fact remains that most of the food we eat depends on the ability of the bees and insects to do their job pollinating. For greater production in your home garden, plant those nectar-rich flowers!

15 Aug 13