

Success Story: Woodland Dunes Nature Preserve Two Rivers, WI



In early August, my family went on vacation to Point Beach State Forest in Two Rivers. A quick internet search for nearby activities that would appeal to our three-year-old led us to the Woodland Dunes Nature Preserve. We spent the car ride talking up the boardwalk paths that she could explore and the nature center that would surely have a turtle or two. As we pulled into the parking lot, however, our daughter squealed with excitement over what appeared to be a children's garden behind the nature center.

And she was right to be excited. Though the garden makes up only a small part of what the land has to offer, its many components provide countless possibilities for imaginative play and exploration with a pleasing array of complex and simple features.

"The garden had been a yard space that wasn't being utilized," explained Jessica Johnsrud, Education Coordinator at Woodland Dunes Nature Preserve. Jim Knickelbine, Executive Director, approached the space with place-based education in mind to create a non-traditional playground. Knickelbine partnered with Sam Dennis (check out his bio on our staff page!) who, along with his design students at UW Madison, proposed a variety of plans for the underutilized space.

Like so many visitors, our daughter was immediately drawn to the water feature, which was just coming to fruition when Johnsrud began working there in 2010. "It's shallow," remarked Johnsrud, "so kids can walk in it. And it doesn't require a lot of maintenance. It circulates water with a pump through a basin. Kids are allowed to throw in any items they find in the garden to see if they sink or float, or they can just splash around."

Other features in the garden are also thoughtfully designed for kids to be kids. A multi-purpose deck serves as a boost to young visitors so they can reach ripe fruit off trees and also provides great hiding spots for those who venture underneath.

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However, what makes the garden so magical is not just these larger installations but the imaginative and diverse ways visitors can interact with the garden's simplest features. The art area, for example, is comprised of what may otherwise seem like garden detritus: acorns, bark, dried flowers, extra wood. The materials change seasonally and can be used to build small structures or fairy houses. Johnsrud has also noticed that at the end of the day, visitors have often moved the materials she initially left in the art area over to the "happy hideaway" (a playhouse-like structure near the back of the garden) to be used as decorations or as food by children playing house.

Johnsrud observes the different ways the 3,000 students who visit the garden annually use the space and she draws inspiration from them. "There's a musical area with wind chimes and a large wooden xylophone that's properly tuned," she explained. "But kids liked to use the xylophone as a hammock, so we added a hammock to the play area."



Of course, the garden can also serve to remind us that we are not the only creatures roaming around. "There are cherry trees in the play area as well as apple trees," Johnsrud said. "These trees attract kids and birds. The kids get to see that we're all interested in the same plants and the same fruits, which adds a neat element of connection."

The prairie maze—a small maze mowed through a patch of prairie grass—is another spot for observing the garden's critters. Ground squirrels and other small mammals use the paths as a through-way, and kids can get close enough to the plants to check out visiting insects. And for visitors interested in getting an even closer look, hand lenses are available in the nature center.

In addition to being open for the public to explore, Woodland Dunes Nature Preserve has a variety of structured programs for kids and adults. You can learn more about upcoming events and programs on their online calendar.

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