

WISCONSIN SCHOOL GARDEN INITIATIVE BRIEF:

OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS FOR YOUNG LEARNERS



**Wisconsin
Partnership Program**
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Imagine a classroom with hills to climb, insects to observe, and special places to gather and reflect. Where does such a place exist? Outside! Outdoor classrooms teach children about the world around them. This brief outlines the benefits of nature play, suggests elements to include in an outdoor classroom, and highlights two Wisconsin schools combining nature, learning, and fun.

Benefits of Outdoor Classrooms

Students as naturalists –

Outdoor classrooms offer hosts of natural elements for student to observe through hands-on, direct experiences.

Students as collaborators –

Outdoor classrooms create opportunities for social interaction and cooperation.

Students as explorers –

Outdoor classrooms promote and celebrate student curiosity, problem-solving, and discovery.

Students as citizens –

Outdoor classrooms teach stewardship of the schoolyard that paves the way for understanding larger neighborhood and community contexts.



Outdoor Classroom Components

Outdoor classrooms are as different as the schools where they can be found. Use these general considerations as a guide, but be inspired and informed by the students the outdoor classroom will serve!

- **Natural playscapes** like hollow logs, grassy hills, and moveable natural materials support healthy development of gross motor skills. Balancing, climbing, and reaching are all practiced in a well-designed play area.
- **Gathering spaces** offer room for an outdoor story or lesson. A grassy area, stump circle, or benches ensure students are able to learn comfortably.
- **Places for quiet observation** such as benches, sunflower houses, or other special places encourage children to take in all of the sights, sounds, and smells surrounding them.
- **Tools for observation** that are child size and age appropriate help kids further interact with nature. Magnifying glasses, tweezers, containers for collection, and a nature journal might comprise an explorer kit.
- **Stations** dedicated for sand, water, and other natural materials keep these items as an integral component to the space. Consider adding a table or chest where students can place and further observe treasures found outdoors.

Outdoor Classrooms in Wisconsin

You do not have to look far to be inspired by students purposefully engaging with nature and natural elements. Outdoor classrooms can be found all over Wisconsin. Here are two stories highlighting early childhood sites that have put nature and nature-based education at the center of their educational programming, both indoors and out.

Pine River School, Merrill

It all started with some backpacks. Modeled after kits seen within the Wisconsin State Park System, Pine River teachers stuffed bags full of binoculars, tweezers, magnifying glasses, popsicle sticks, field guides, clipboards, and pencils. The Explorer Backpacks were an immediate success, and continued to be well-used today. In all weather, students can be seen carefully picking up objects with the tweezers and putting them in handmade collection baskets.

However, now the Explorer Backpacks are just one of many items students can use to engage with their natural environment. Today, the Pine River outdoor classroom also features hills to climb, tunnels to navigate, a garden to grow, and butterflies to study. Fields of corn planted by the high school FFA surround the large outdoor space. And Pine River is not done yet. They hope to add a butterfly art path, a composting program, fruit trees, and chickens before the end of the school year!



Pine River School's Outdoor Classroom

Woodland Montessori School, Madison

For some schools, the loss of a tree might be a sad, but brief lesson in natural cycles. At Woodland, the loss of a tree became a chance to celebrate, play, and learn with that tree on a daily basis. The silver maple tree that quietly shaded the school's outdoor classroom needed to be removed. Instead of shade, the tree now offers tunnels, paths, seats, balance beams, and building supplies. Not to mention lessons in conservation, ecology, and more.

Opportunities for playing and learning are effortlessly intertwined in Woodland's Outdoor Classroom. The trunk, logs, and branches of the silver maple add another layer to the outdoor classroom that also features gardens, wooden play structures, sand boxes, and a shady shelter. Playing and learning through interaction with natural elements take center stage in this outdoor classroom. For proof, just consider the silver maple tree.



Woodland Montessori's Outdoor Classroom

Resources

- Natural Learning Initiatives, NC State University: <http://naturalearning.org/nli-infosheets>
- Nature Explore: <http://www.natureexplore.org/>
- The Outdoor Classroom Project: <http://outdoorclassroomproject.org/>
- Claire Warden, Founder of Scotland's first Nature Kindergarten: <http://www.claire-warden.com/>
- Environmental Education in Wisconsin: <http://eeinwisconsin.org/>



For more information about the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, visit us at WISchoolGardens.org

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