

Outdoor Classrooms

By Valynda Mayes

Every science lesson can't feature a field trip, and every school does not have space for a wooded nature trail. Are you yearning for ways to get your students outdoors? Even with limited resources, you can create an outdoor learning environment. Whether it's a garden, a wildlife viewing station, an erosion project, or a geology study, your outdoor classroom will be a special place for your students to learn.

An outdoor classroom is also the ideal vehicle for community involvement: Parents, native plant societies, 4-H, garden clubs, and master naturalists are all resources waiting to be tapped, as are local businesses offering support. You will enlist your community in the development and maintenance of your outdoor classroom, and the entire community will benefit! All you need are organizational skills, imagination, and these resources to make it happen.

Arbor Day Foundation: Nature Explore

www.arborday.org/explore

In addition to the offerings of the Arbor Day Foundation, this program offers a research based resource guide for educators working to connect children with nature. You can certify your outdoor classroom, or use the registration form to evaluate your project.



Boston Schoolyard Initiative

www.schoolyards.org

This ambitious long-term project may inspire your community to try something similar.

Captain Planet Foundation

www.captainplanetfdn.org/grants.html

Outdoor classrooms can fit the criteria of the Captain Planet grants for hands-on projects that promote environmental awareness.

Children and Nature Network

www.childrenandnature.org

This organization is "building a movement to connect children and nature." If you are involving family members in your efforts, you may be interested in starting a Nature Club for Families. Nature Rocks (www.naturerocks.org) is a companion website for parents.

D.C. Schoolyard Greening

www.dcschoolyardgreening.org/gettingstarted/projecttypes.html

Don't let an urban environment stop you from considering an outdoor classroom. Check out this program in our nation's capital, especially this page of project types.

Evergreen

www.evergreen.ca/en/lg/lg-resources.html#start

U.S. schools are not eligible for their funding, but this Canadian organization's website is a must-visit for its abundance of free downloadable information, from research to volunteer management. The resources include not only the usual how-to but also some interesting ideas like using rammed earth bricks in outdoor building projects.

Georgia Wildlife Federation: Planning First to Make Your Outdoor Classroom Last

www.gwf.org/resources/wildlifehabitats/bmps.pdf

You will find Appendix D, the Outdoor Classroom Needs and Interests Survey for Teachers, invaluable in planning for your site and assembling a team of like-minded teachers. Despite the state-level focus, this is a useful primer for the outdoor classroom planner.

Lowe's Outdoor Classroom Grant Program

www.lowes.com/lowes/lkn?action=pg&p>AboutLowe/outdoor/index.html

Read about past recipients and apply for grants up to \$2000 to create or upgrade outdoor classrooms. Spring 2010 applications are due February 12. Fall applications will be accepted later this year.

School Garden Wizard

www.schoolgardenwizard.org

This site includes comprehensive instructions for creating the garden, keeping it growing, and learning in the garden.

The Maryland Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education Project How-Tos: Tips and Instructions for Hundreds of Projects

www.maeoe.org/habitat/projects

There is something for everyone on

Share With S&C

We'd love to hear about the ways you are incorporating the outdoors into your curriculum, send your story to s&c@nsta.org.

this list, from shoreline restoration to stormwater management.

The National Gardening Association and Home Depot Youth Garden Grants Program

<http://assoc.garden.org/grants>

These \$500 to \$1000 grants are awarded to garden projects with curriculum connections as well as "social aspects of gardening such as leadership development, team building, community support, or service-learning." The National Gardening Association posts many other opportunities on its grants page. Also make sure to visit the kids' page at www.kids-gardening.org.

University of Tennessee Extension Service: Developing an Outdoor Classroom to Provide Education Naturally

www.utextension.utk.edu/publications/wfiles/w113.pdf

This excellent guide gives an overview of the basics: getting started, funding, maintenance, but it really shines with its inclusion of a list of site enhancements. The pamphlet also includes ideas for cross-curriculum integration and a site evaluation form.

Exploring Safely



Follow your school guidelines for outdoor explorations, and keep the following precautions in mind. Make sure you are aware of any student allergies. Become familiar with risks in your area, from poison ivy to fire ants, and take the necessary safety steps.

Once you have evaluated your site and considered your curriculum, the inspiration will come to you, as will the opportunities for connecting with your community. What is your passion? If it's food and nutrition, try partnering with a chef (see www.edibleschoolyard.org). Is it insects? Contact an entomology professor or apiarist (bee keeper). Water usage? Contact an environmental agency and set up rain barrels. Your outdoor classroom does not need to spring to life complete—watching it develop over months and years is a valuable part of the process.

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Connecting to the Standards

This article relates to the following *National Science Education Standards* (NRC 1996):

Teaching Standards Standard D:

Teachers of science design and manage learning environments that provide students with the time, space, and resources needed for learning science.

In doing this, teachers

- Identify and use resources outside the school.
- Engage students in designing the learning environment.

National Research Council (NRC). 1996. *National science education standards*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.