



## Reflection: Engaging with the Local Environments in New Zealand and Japanese Early Childhood Education

from Rachael Burke, Japan and New Zealand

I recently moved to Japan from New Zealand and have been examining the strong desire to have 'nature' prominent in children's experiences in each country's early childhood context. What does this mean in practical terms? In New Zealand's early childhood education programs, engaging with nature is approached from a holistic socio-cultural point of view. Measures include creating nature corners planted with miniature native bush, hanging ropes for swinging from trees, and making natural resources such as feathers, shells, stones, leaves, and flowers available for creative purposes.

In Japan, there is an emphasis on making children aware of their environment through activities linked to the changing seasons or native plants and flowers. Children are free to explore the unfenced boundary areas, surrounded by trees, flowers, and a myriad of insects from spring to autumn. Japanese children learn about the lifecycle of various plants and animals by learning relevant songs, reading books together, being given practical opportunities to grow a vegetable or fruit, or observing an evolving insect. Teachers say that these practices are useful ways to get children connected with nature and to appreciate where their food comes from.

In New Zealand, children's interactions with native flora and fauna are generally approached in a holistic manner. Rather than studying a specific creature's lifecycle, teachers respond to individual children's interest in insects and animals they encounter. As other children become interested, these creatures become the focus of sustained projects, which are documented in children's learning stories.

Imperfect creations made from foraged sticks, leaves, or pebbles are the mainstay of art sessions in New Zealand's centres. Teachers amass diverse collections of real, natural objects that children are free to touch, play with, and use as a basis for creative projects. Children are encouraged to fossick (mine) for keepsakes to add to the bins of wool, feathers, shells, wood, and recycled paper that are accessed to create these *objets d'art*.

Food scraps are put into a compost bin, and the compost applied to stimulate the growth of vegetables, flowers, and herbs planted around the playground. From successful gardens children produce worm juice, which is sold to families and the local community. (Worm juice is the liquid produced when worms are contained in 'farms' and fed food scraps and green waste.) The liquid is a potent natural fertilizer that is popular with New Zealand gardeners. In Japan, garden produce is fed to chickens and rabbits kept on the grounds. Through all of these circular, bounded acts, children in both New Zealand and Japan connect not only with their local environments, but also with the communities that sustain them.

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Consider this:

- How do you represent your unique local society and culture in your center's outdoor environment?
- What collections of natural items could you and your families gather for children to use in creative projects?



A NEW ZEALAND GIRL SWINGS FROM A TREE DECORATED WITH A DRIFTWOOD AND PUMICE HANGING SCULPTURE  
photos provided by Rachael Burke





## Reflection: Wetherby Park Edible Forest

from Fred Meyer, United States

The Wetherby Park Edible Forest is a grove of low-maintenance, organic fruit trees, berry bushes, herbs, and other edibles established in 2011 in an urban park in Iowa City, Iowa, United States. With help from hundreds of volunteers, the one-third acre space was created through a partnership between Backyard Abundance and the Iowa City Parks and Recreation Department.



Photo provided by Fred Meyer

Many families struggle to find time to cultivate annual vegetable gardens and this lack of time can be a major barrier to reducing food bills and eating healthy. The edible forest addresses this issue by providing access to freely harvestable, nutritious food while simultaneously demonstrating how families can establish low-maintenance edibles in their own yards. Unlike a vegetable garden, this area emulates a healthy woodland ecosystem of perennial, edible plants that improves as it matures. Fruit trees, berry bushes, culinary herbs, and edible ground cover will yield thousands of pounds of free food for decades while retaining moisture, resisting weeds, and providing a wildlife habitat.

The site serves as an outdoor classroom and children's play space where frequent educational events are held. 'Planting Parties' teach families how to establish low-maintenance edibles. Propagation classes demonstrate how to sustainably take cuttings and seeds from plants to establish them in their own yards. Celebratory events demonstrate how to harvest, cook, and store produce.

Even when free food is available in a public park, most people are reluctant to harvest it due to a lack of understanding about which plants are safe to eat, when to harvest, and how to prepare the food. To address these issues, plant signs will be installed in April 2015 throughout the area describing each plant and its harvest period. An online website will launch at this time to provide additional information about each plant. People with Internet-connected smartphones can scan a QR code on each sign for immediate, detailed information about the plant.

*Backyard Abundance is an Iowa City-based nonprofit that helps people create environmentally-beneficial landscapes. The Wetherby Park Edible Forest design and plant list is freely available on its website: [www.BackyardAbundance.org](http://www.BackyardAbundance.org).*

Consider this:

- Partnering with existing community programs is beneficial for your center, your families, and your neighborhood. Can you find some resources in your community to collaborate with to better serve your families?
- Can you find ways such as school gardening projects to support families in providing nutritious and easy-to-prepare food?

Wonder, the newsletter of the NACC, welcomes submissions from all NACC members. Please join us at: [www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature](http://www.worldforumfoundation.org/nature).

The NACC Leadership Team is a core group of early childhood educators, designers, and landscape architects who came together in 2006 with a dream to change the world for young children. They represent six continents across the globe, and serve as key contact points for others around the world who have a desire to improve the lives of young children.

The Leadership Team meets periodically to discuss strategies for increasing NACC's outreach and membership, and to find new ways for all of us to work together to further our common mission.



## Reflection: Butterflies, Chickens, and Frogs, Oh My!

from Marsha M. Jarman, United States

One day I was exploring the Arbor Day Foundation website because I am a member and I came across the Nature Explore program. Our center, Friends Forever Learning Center, Inc. in Berlin, Maryland, sits on seven acres; I had been looking for something meaningful to do with the large open acreage. Needless to say, I was quite intrigued. I immediately began the process of designing our Nature Explore Classroom, never imagining what it has become today. As a start, we included the recommended and supplemental areas for exploration. Over time we have seen this space transform children's lives as they experience the beauty and wonders of the great outdoors and develop a sense of caring for our environment.

Our center believes that we are building a community of learners who are developing a sense of belonging, while fine-tuning their observation skills. To enhance these experiences, we focused on adding domesticated animals and wildlife. We now have chickens, ducks, rabbits, and goats that our children are learning to care for. Many wonderful butterfly observations have taken place in our butterfly garden that uses indigenous plants to attract them.

Our outdoor classroom is also unique in that it includes a bird sanctuary that meets the requirements of the National Wildlife Federation as a certified wildlife habitat. Bird watching has become quite fascinating for the children. They make different types of bird feeders and observe the variety of birds they attract.

We added a goldfish pond where our children can watch the fish swim. Sometimes frogs come to visit and jump into the pond. These are exciting moments as the children have fun counting how many frogs they see!

As an outreach to our community, we have invited child care facilities in the surrounding area to visit our outdoor classroom as a field trip destination. We want visiting children to have the opportunity to explore what our own children experience on a daily basis.

Our outdoor classroom is always a work in progress. We will continue to improve it by using more local, indigenous plants, animals, natural materials, and community contributions as much as possible. I wonder what will happen next?

*Marsha M. Jarman is Director/Owner of Friends Forever Learning Center, Inc. in Berlin, Maryland. She can be reached at [friends4ever@hughes.net](mailto:friends4ever@hughes.net). Friends Forever Learning Center is dedicated to providing experiences that foster the social, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of the children we serve. Our staff is committed to the families we serve by providing support, encouragement, and excellent service. Our mission is to provide an affordable, high-quality, developmentally appropriate program in a safe, nurturing, and loving environment for preschool and school-age children.*

Consider this:

- Just like Marsha, many folks describe their outdoor classroom as a "work in progress." Have you considered enhancing yours by delineating interest areas, adding animals, or planting to attract butterflies?
- Great new conversations often occur when child care providers in the same community work together. What would happen if you invited surrounding child care facilities to visit your outdoor classroom or asked to visit one near you?

## Put Stewardship into Action

**Fun Fact:** Did you know that the native plants in your outdoor learning space will help clean groundwater?

Native plants can be a great link to learning about water conservation. Once native plant material is established, it usually only requires the amount of rain that falls in your area. That means native plants don't require us to give them extra water! Help your children take action by choosing and planting a native plant in your school yard with the activity on page 36 of the **Environmental Toolkit for Educators** ([www.worldforumfoundation.org/working-groups/nature/environmental-action-kit/materials/educators/](http://www.worldforumfoundation.org/working-groups/nature/environmental-action-kit/materials/educators/)).



Photo provided by Marsha Jarman