Recovering from a cold, Salvatore Cherone felt a lot better when he stepped outside for morning recess. "It was a sunny day, and I saw a black swallowtail butterfly," says Cherone, 8, who attends the Beebe School in Malden, Massachusetts. "It's so cool to see butterflies in real life. I like it a lot better than studying about them in a book."

Cherone is fortunate enough to attend a school that incorporates a nature program into the curriculum. At his school, which sits in the center of the city, they planted the 30- by 50-foot garden in 1999. Beebe teachers use it as an outdoor laboratory for everything from studying the life cycle of the butterfly and the four seasons to learning the importance of preserving habitats.

The natural world lends itself well to teaching, says Cherone's second-grade teacher, Deborah Greenwood, who raises monarchs in the fall and releases them, and does a similar butterfly project in the spring. "In a natural setting kids actually see the eggs on the leaves, and it's fascinating for them to watch them grow and eventually become butterflies. They're always out in the garden with magnifying glasses checking for eggs and caterpillars."

Such school-based nature programs are experiencing a grassroots groundswell of interest. Organizations nationwide, from obvious participants such as the National Gardening Association and National Wildlife Federation to not so obvious participants like various school districts, have determined that putting nature back into the classroom may be the answer to what ails schools and learning in general. Some programs are even focused on native plants.

Schoolyard greening
The greening of schoolyards is a popular, engaging topic that has an international following, says Libby McCann, Program Manager for Earth Partnership for Schools in Madison, Wisconsin. This 13-year-old K-12 environmental education program focuses on satisfying educational mandates and requirements while working to restore native habitats. To date they have reached 165 schools, 600 teachers, and more than 120,000 students.

"Although nature programs are under-funded in this country, there are still many people throughout the United States who are incredibly passionate about greening schoolyards and creating habitats for learning," says McCann.

Strong private funding and an investment on the part of various school systems exists in various areas of the country, says Bo Hoppin, project director for the Co-Seed Project in Keene, New Hampshire, which works in partnership with Antioch University to provide schools with environmental learning centers. Since 1996 they've worked with 11 schools throughout the New England area, in urban and rural areas, which each have their own challenges.

"Rural areas have the land, but they often lack the resources to make school gardens a reality, and urban areas are the exact opposite," says Hoppin. "While they lack space, they have an abundance of resources."

Participatory school nature-based experiences are so valuable to children, says Lois Brink, associate professor of landscape architecture at the University of Colorado and director of The Learning Landscape Alliance, "which will bring learning landscapes (many native habitats) to 75 percent of Denver public schools by 2006.

"You can pile a bunch of kids into a bus and take them to see the national grasslands, but when they come home there is no continued day-to-day connection, or you can create a habitat that sustains their interest right there on the school playground," she says. "With a wild place to learn, kids can
enjoy the slow wonder of life by sitting and picking apart a seed head or finding a praying mantis: “such discovery is a vital part of childhood.”

Outdoor Laboratories
Researchers are finding that children need more than traditional play equipment to develop well and become lifelong learners. “Nature-based schoolyards are a wonderful laboratory for thinking and intellectual growth. Once you get these schoolyards growing, they make fabulous classrooms” the curriculum is right there at their feet,” says Virginia Sullivan of Learning by the Yard in Conway, Massachusetts. She consults to schools and designers and is a Ph.D student at the College of Design at North Carolina State University, where she is studying the link between children’s language development and their direct experience with the natural world.

“Nature stimulates the senses and promotes inquiry,” says Sullivan. “Psychologists tell us that you are able to learn the best at the point when you are surprised by something. Outdoors there is always something happening, such as tree leaves swaying in the wind or colorful bugs crawling on plants. Kids are constantly refocusing outdoors, and that encourages them to ask questions.”

The complete article is available within the Fall 2004 issue of Native Plants magazine - click here to subscribe.

Return to past issues of Wildflower Magazine