

Setting up a Nature Table in the Classroom

A nature table is an area in a classroom that is dedicated to collecting and displaying items found in the outdoor world. This is an excellent way to help children become more observant of the world around them. It can help bridge the gap between the indoor classroom and the outdoors. They can be a valuable addition to the classroom of any elementary grade, and can serve as a springboard for many different activities that integrate knowledge from across all subjects.

All you'll need is a designated area in the classroom that is accessible to all students. Tables of any size work best, but an empty bookshelf could also be used.

- A great way to introduce the nature table is to bring in a few sample objects. Rocks, pinecones, sticks, leaves, flowers, grasses, and shells are all great examples of things to bring in. Arrange them on the table and introduce each object to the class by describing its interesting and beautiful features.
 - Collecting in Regional, Provincial or National Parks is not allowed without written permission.
 - If you aren't sure if you should take something, take a picture instead.
- Encourage children to find objects outside that they find beautiful and/or interesting. It is important to stress that they must not destroy living things. If they would like a sample of a leaf from a plant they should do so gently, and only if there is an abundance of the species.
 - Always collect less than 5% of what is present (1 in 20). If there aren't more than 20 others around, take a picture instead.
 - Try to choose objects that have fallen off of plants naturally.



- Collection can be done at home, during recess or lunch, or if you wish you can schedule times to go on a nature walk with the specific intent of finding objects. This can help the entire class get involved.
- If children bring in leaves or flowers, provide them with the option to press them. This will prevent the specimen from wilting and browning. However, it can also be an interesting experience to see what happens to it when left untouched. Please see our document on how to build your own plant press for reference.

- It can be beneficial to bring in several live plants. You may also wish to have students plant and grow their own seeds. Another option is to have a section of your nature table for live animals – this could take the form of starting a classroom compost bin for earthworms, an ant farm, an aquarium, or having containers for caterpillars to grow and change into butterflies. The addition of live organisms to the nature table and having children help care for them can be an exciting way to teach about social responsibility and the needs of living things.
 - Think carefully about any living organisms you put on the table, make sure they can be taken care of appropriately, including over weekends and school breaks.
- Reference the nature table often in different ways – it should be a relevant and meaningful addition to the classroom environment.

Sample activities that incorporate the nature table:

The nature table can be incorporated into many lessons of different subjects. Below are a few of our ideas to get you thinking about the possibilities.

Science:

- Have a variety of field books for local organisms. Children of all ages will enjoy identifying the different species. Have them draw and name the species that they identify in their nature journals.
- Students can sort the objects into living and non-living groups. Be sure to teach the class that even the non-living things, such as rocks and shells, play a very important role as the habitats of living organisms.
- If you choose to have living plants or animals in the classroom, children can make regular observations, drawings, and notes in their nature journals to track growth and development.

Mathematics:

- For a measurement lesson, children in younger grades can use different objects from the nature table as a form of non-standard measurement to measure familiar objects. In older grades, children can measure and arrange the objects using rulers and scales.
- For primary grades, encourage them to arrange and sort the objects in a meaningful way. They may choose to do this by colour, size, or type. Egg cartons can be used as an inexpensive way to separate different objects.
- For older students, discuss the idea of patterns you can find in nature. Spirals (Fibonacci sequence), dichotomous branching, numbers of plant parts, and circles are all around us!
- Depending on your objects, you may be able to calculate surface area and volume. Using a 1cm x 1cm grid is a good way to estimate area.



Language Arts:

- Students can choose an object off of the table that is meaningful to them and write the story of how it came to be. This can be done in a variety of forms of media for older children - newspaper articles, comic strips, or even writing a play.

Social Studies:

- The nature table can be a great addition to a lesson on Aboriginal culture, since many local species are a very important part of their cultural traditions. After discussing the different plants, children can identify them on the table and make connections to their traditional uses.
- For primary grades, going on a nature walk can also serve as a mapping lesson. Providing the class with an overhead map of the route you took and having them add in symbols of approximately where specimens were found can teach them about the local neighbourhood and environmental conditions.