

Education E-Scoop

Nature-inspired learning on the go...

Infuse your classroom curriculum with plants, nature, and the great outdoors! Keep this 12-month tip sheet handy for fresh ideas and inspiration. To learn more about Garden education programs, visit www.mobot.org/schoolprograms.

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January



Plant of the Month

American sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*)

This tree's creamy-white mottled bark is a stunning sight amid the grays of winter. It's also regarded as the most massive

tree indigenous to eastern North America. Can you find one near your schoolyard or neighborhood?

Get Out!

Outdoor Learning: Tip of the Month

Winter is a great time to observe the shapes of trees and how they branch. Invite your students outside and ask them to describe the shapes of nearby tree crowns. Are they triangular ('pyramidal') or are they tall and straight ('columnar')? Do they spread upward ('vase-shaped') or are they round ('globular')? Download our [Bare is Beautiful](#) guide for inspiration and ideas.

Literacy Links

Trees can tell interesting stories. As your students explore local trees, ask them to observe and describe what they see...the bark patterns, evidence of hungry woodpeckers, insect trails, etc. Challenge your students to select a tree, study it closely, then write a short story from that tree's perspective.

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February



Plant of the Month

Ozark Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis vernalis*)

On warm winter days in February, a sweet honey-like and almost spicy scent drifts on gentle breezes in some gardens and woodlands. This Missouri native **witch hazel** is blooming now at the Garden and Shaw Nature Reserve. Can you find them elsewhere?

Get Out!

Outdoor Learning: Tip of the Month

Native birds, bees, moths, and flies venture out on warm winter days to forage, thus pollinate, witch hazel flowers. What other foraging critters can your students observe this winter? Post a log in your classroom, encourage them to record their observations, and challenge other classrooms to see who can document the most!

Literacy Links

Had enough winter yet? If thinking warm thoughts just isn't cutting it, get your students planning their gardens. Whether school gardens, home gardens, balcony/container gardens, everyone can plant something. Encourage your students do some investigative journalism and query their peers and the entire school: Who is planning a garden? What will they plant and why?

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March



Plant of the Month

Serviceberry (*Amelanchier arborea*)

This early-flowering Missouri native **Plant of Merit™** thrives in rocky woods, woody slopes, and bluffs. Its 5-petaled,

showy white flowers appear in March before its leaves emerge. It has dark purplish-black edible berries, commonly called Juneberries, that are often used in jams, jellies, and pies.

Get Out!

Outdoor Learning: Tip of the Month

Citizen science opportunities abound! Done a BioBlitz yet? Counted monarchs? Recorded frog calls? Get informed, inspired, and connected with fellow citizen scientists close to home and around the world. A few of our favorites: **The Great Sunflower Project**, **FrogWatch USA**, **Project BudBurst**, **Great Backyard Bird Count**, and **MonarchWatch**.

Literacy Links

Phenology: the periodic study of plant and animal life cycle events. This spring, invite your students to become junior phenologists! Send them outside to collect data on when plants flush, flower, and fruit, and any other natural phenomena they can observe. If they're already journaling, encourage them to document and compare their findings.

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April



Plant of the Month

Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*)

This Missouri state tree is among the most beautiful of the native American flowering trees. It is a small, deciduous tree

that blooms in early spring. What looks like a large four-petaled flower is actually not a flower at all. The true dogwood flowers are the tiny, yellowish-green, button-like clusters surrounded by four showy, white, petal-like bracts.

Get Out!

Outdoor Learning: Tip of the Month

April often means student testing and other end-of-year angst. Thus we're keeping our tip simple: Get outdoors. Frequently. Regardless of the topic you're teaching, routinely taking your class outdoors can do wonders, including stress reduction, increased focus, and more positive/optimistic thinking.

Literacy Links

A few decades ago, **Earth Day** started as just a little grain of an idea sprouting in the minds of a few people. What worthy ideas are sprouting in your classroom? Challenge your young citizens to think big this month. Take a virtual tour around the world to explore the everyday challenges of others—fresh water, affordable and healthy food, clean air. Then re-direct their focus closer to home. Encourage “Why?” and “What if?” questions.

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May



Plant of the Month

Shining Blue Star (*Amsonia illustris*)

Looking for a nice addition to your school's butterfly garden?

Consider this Missouri native perennial: *Amsonia*

illustris—it attracts butterflies, is low maintenance, and is easy to grow from seed. Also known as “Ozark blue star,” this plant thrives in borders, meadows, open shade gardens, native plant gardens, and other naturalized areas.

Get Out!

Outdoor Learning: Tip of the Month

Nature's intricate details never cease to amaze us. This month, invite your students to sketch the details of a flower's complex structure—a common tactic of field botanists—and challenge them to label the real names of the flower's parts. We'd love to see your students' sketches! Just email education@mobot.org.

Literacy Links

Started by cyclists and librarians in Vermont, the **StoryWalk® Project** promotes the development of physical fitness and literacy skills by walking and reading in the great outdoors. Sometimes found at nature centers and parks, school-based StoryWalks are starting to sprout up! Check out [this guide](#) to start a StoryWalk® at your school. You can also visit your local library or **Shaw Nature Reserve** for StoryWalk® events.

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June



Plant of the Month

Indian pink (*Spigelia marilandica*)

Throughout June, hike your favorite nearby woodland to seek out this native perennial in full bloom. Indian pink's red trumpet flowers and bright yellow star-shaped throats make it especially attractive to hummingbirds. While naturally found in moist woods and stream banks, this is a great plant to add to a home shade garden and is available at many local nurseries.

Get Out!

Outdoor Learning: Tip of the Month

Kudos on finishing up another school year! When June rolls around, we imagine many of you reflect about your year, and life slows down just a bit. While enjoying a well-deserved summer break, take some time to stroll your school community's streets, neighborhoods, businesses, parks, and general surroundings. Consider how your students could better connect with their community next year via real-world projects and problems to solve. Such connections can lead to a greater sense of community ownership, pride, and place.

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July



Plant of the Month

Swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*)

This sun-loving perennial sports large clusters of pink and white flowers in July and August.

Swamp milkweed is the host plant of monarch caterpillars, but its nectar attracts a diversity of butterflies. To adequately feed voracious caterpillars, plant at least 6 to 10 plants in a bunch.

Get Out!

Outdoor Learning: Tip of the Month

We empathize with those of you struggling to keep school-based gardens thriving during the summer months. Check out this great [video tutorial](#) from our friends at Gateway Greening, covering the basics of when and how much to water, as well as ideas for simple, kid-friendly tools to make and use.

Literacy Links

You can imagine why those of us at the Garden love *Miss Rumphius*, by Barbara Cooney, a classic story about Alice, a woman who planted lupine in the wild to make the world more beautiful. What ideas can this story spark among your students? With a special focus on native plants, in what ways could they follow the Lupine Lady's example?

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August



Plant of the Month

Blue sage (*Salvia pitcheri*)

With another school year beginning, sage is a timely plant to profile. A member of the mint family, blue sage is a Missouri native perennial that occurs in dry soils on limestone glades, prairies, and open ground. Attractive to bees and butterflies, it's a great low-maintenance plant to beautify borders and prairie-like areas.

Get Out!

Outdoor Learning: Tip of the Month

As you approach the coming school year with fresh eyes, look upon your schoolyard in the same way. How can your school's campus play host to more outdoor learning experiences? What's your favorite outdoor learning landscape in St. Louis? **Let us know**, and we'll profile them in future E-Scoop issues!

Literacy Links

List-keeping is a great hobby—places, birds, books, etc. But what about other, less common lists? In *Seeing Trees* by Nancy Hugo and Robert Llewellyn, the authors describe a young boy on a quest to collect as many different acorns as possible, one from each of the native oak species living in his neighborhood and community. What new, nature-inspired lists could you or your students start keeping today? Set a goal and get out!

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September



Plant of the Month

Compass plant (*Silphium laciniatum*)

This Missouri native perennial earned its common name by the compass orientation of its leaves, which

orient themselves on a north-south axis to minimize moisture loss from exposure to the sun. Just one plant can produce up to 12 stems, and surveys show an average of 80 insects, representing many different taxa, on each stem or within its tissues.

Get Out!

Outdoor Learning: Tip of the Month

Fall color comes not just in well-known autumn leaves. The berries of beautyberry (*Callicarpa*) ripen to a lavender color, signaling birds to come and feast. Seed-eating birds forage on ripe coneflower seed, blazing star, and other earlier blooming forbs. Challenge your students to see who can observe and document the longest list of living color this fall!

Literacy Links

Recently, the Garden launched a new Seed Bank for all native Missouri plants. Based out at Shaw Nature Reserve, the Seed Bank staff and volunteers collect and clean seed from the field, conduct germination studies, and hone storage techniques to preserve seed viability. Challenge your students to learn more and share their findings with each other. [Learn more.](#)

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October



Plant of the Month

Persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*)

Can you spot persimmon fruits turning from an orange to reddish-purple color? Its genus name, *Diospyros*, comes from

Greek *dios* (divine) and *pyros* (wheat or grain), meaning “divine fruit.” It is one of the easiest trees to identify in winter because of its distinctive thick, dark gray bark that is broken into rectangular blocks.

Get Out!

Outdoor Learning: Tip of the Month

The sounds of nature are everywhere—in urban areas or remote reserves. Next time you take your group outdoors, have them sit for a while with eyes closed and ears open to experience the everyday world in a different way. Or consider the Shaw Nature Reserve’s new **Ecology of Wolves** program for grades 3 and up, held in partnership with the Endangered Wolf Center.

Literacy Links

After the activity above, challenge your students to list as many sounds as they can. Categorize them in as many ways possible (human, bird, insects, wind, etc.) then ask your students to do the same activity at home with their families to compare and contrast with their findings at school. In addition to building literacy skills, you’ll also be encouraging quality family time spent outdoors!

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November



Plant of the Month

Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*)

This native tallgrass prairie plant is quite showy this month, with color ranging from deep orange to purple. It is much loved

by birds, native bees, and small animals. While it can grow up to 8 feet tall, about 2/3 of its mass is below ground—a dense root structure stabilizes soil and prevents erosion. Nutans, Latin for “swaying,” refers to how it blows in the wind.

Get Out!

Outdoor Learning: Tip of the Month

Late fall is a great time to look for signs of wildlife—tracks in the mud, rubbings on trees, scat, cocoons, egg cases, acorn tops, etc. What signs of life can your young naturalists find in your schoolyard, local park, or nearby streetscape? Make it a competition to see who can find the most! If you have digital cameras, encourage your students to document their discoveries then construct a wild story using the images.

Literacy Links

During this month of giving thanks, encourage your students to consider nature’s everyday gifts—the sun, trees, bird songs, garden harvests, the moon, etc. Then invite them to tap their inner poet using their style of choice. Here’s a hike-inspired haiku from us to you: Curious young minds, lit aglow by autumn hues, native trees above. **Send us** your best nature poetry!

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December



Plant of the Month

Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*)

While hollies may be the most well-known berry this time of year, other berries deserve notice.

Beautyberry is a low-maintenance native shrub valued for its spectacular, bright purple fruits (actually berry-like drupes), which persist even after the leaves have fallen. Birds and deer love to eat this plant's berries, helping to spread seeds.

Get Out!

Outdoor Learning: Tip of the Month

December is for the birds! Our feathered friends love to hang out outside your classroom window snacking on seeds and suet. Seek out prime spots with your students, and let them plan the where, what, how, and why of winter bird-feeding. Once the feast begins, post a handy log for students to document visitors!

Literacy Links

Your school has a mascot, school colors, and a motto, but what about a school plant? Have your students research local native plants and select a species to represent your school—in your landscape, on your principal's desk, or sold at fundraisers. Use the winter months to research and lobby for one. **Email us** your progress, ideas, or questions!