

Weeding & Mulching the Garden



Introduction

I used to have a hard time getting upper elementary kids excited about weeding. I would bring the students to the garden, point out the plants we wanted to keep and ask them to pull out anything that didn't look like such-and-such. This didn't work very well and would, inevitably, end up with many kids wandering off and hitting each other with sticks.

I assumed this was because kids just found weeding dull work. Which is funny because I actually really enjoy it. So I began to ask myself "what is it about weeding that I like?" The answer for me is twofold:

1. It engages all five senses - I like tasting the edible weeds; touching plants and soil; smelling the plants and soil; seeing a nice, neat garden bed; and listening to the sounds of nature – the birds, the crickets and cicadas, the sound of the snapping twigs.
2. It's like a scavenger hunt.

Now that I've figured it out, my weeding workshop is a favorite with the kids. I still have one or two who are queasy about dirt but, in general, most kids have a great time.

This workshop is aimed at 4th through 6th graders. It can be done with younger children but it is dangerous to let them taste the weeds because they may not have the prudence to avoid eating the wrong things. You can adjust the timing of the scavenger hunts depending on the size of your garden and your group, but it should be a challenge. Too long a time and the kids will start to wander.

This presentation is ideal for a smaller group of 8 - 12 children. If you have a larger class, you should consider dividing them into smaller groups and either have multiple presenters or take groups out separately to work on separate parts of the garden.

A Word of Caution: after hearing this presentation, some of the kids in the class often become very excited about eating weeds. Some of them will probably continue to eat them during and after your presentation, and some may try to bring some home to their parents or tell younger kids about eating weeds. I find this is especially true of wood sorrel and sheep sorrel – not so much with dandelions, but there's often still one in the crowd. As you might imagine, you need to have a plan to deal with this level of enthusiasm. First, only choose plants that are very easy to identify, so that mistakes are less likely. Second, make it clear to the students that they should talk with their parents before eating these weeds outside of class, and should not show them to smaller children. Third, it is wise to discuss this challenge with the teacher and head of school before presenting to the classroom. The excitement is really cool to watch but runs the risk of making school officials, and parents, uncomfortable.

Materials

- Paper bag for “weeds” or nearby compost bin
- Hand-held microscope
- Shears and pruning tools as necessary
- Garden Spades for each student, if possible
- A living dandelion, leaves and roots intact. Preferably with a flower but just leaves and root will work, too
- Mulch – I use salt marsh hay, but you should use a mulch that is appropriate for your situation.

Preparation

Scope out the garden and make sure that you can identify a number of interesting, and hopefully edible, plants for the kids to see, taste and smell. They might also get to taste some of the non-weedy plants in the garden, depending on the time of year.

Research these plants so that you can teach the children something interesting about them. The more wonder you create, the more memorable the experience will be.

Find a place for the students to sit in a circle, convenient to the garden, the mulch and the spades.

Presentation

I like to run my presentations as a series of questions. Children enjoy being engaged in a discussion, and they love to show you what they already know. Make sure to ask some questions that at least some of the students will be able to answer. And make sure you have a few zingers in there to blow their minds.

When the students are all seated in the circle, you can begin. Below is some sample dialogue. Notice that I rarely go far before asking a question:

“Hello friends. I need your attention right here...”

[If you don't know the children's names, have them go around the circle and introduce themselves. Make sure to introduce yourself, too.]

"So raise your hand if you can tell me the definition of a weed."

[Let the kids answer]

"Well, here's my definition: a weed is a plant that is in the wrong place. It can be a very useful plant, but it's in the wrong place. Now, if you can give me an example of a weed, raise your hand."

[Let the kids answer. Usually the dandelion will come up.]

"Who knows where the dandelion comes from?" [pause for answers]

"Most of the dandelions you see around here originally came from Europe. Early European settlers brought them over. Why do you think they would do that?" [pause for answers]

"They actually brought them to eat, and possibly for medicine."

"Do you know what the word 'dandelion' means?" [pause]

"It comes from French: 'dent de lion' or 'lion's tooth' because the leaves look like they have teeth... Now raise your hand if you think that you can eat dandelions?"

[Pull out the dandelion that you brought.]

So should I eat this?" [Listen to their answers and then eat a leaf or flower]

"Now who thinks it's a good idea to go around picking random things and stuffing them into your mouth?" [pause for answers.]

"That's right. You need to be sure of what you are eating. I happen to know for absolute certain that this is a dandelion. And I know that dandelions are entirely edible – which is why I ate it. But you should always check with a grown-up before eating something that isn't on your plate, and please don't tell the little kids that they can eat weeds. Some weeds can be poisonous – but not the dandelion. So this is our secret, right? [make sure this sinks in.]

OK, who wants to try one?" [pass out leaves to anyone who is interested.]

"You can eat every part of a dandelion. People make wine from the flowers. Or you can dip the flowers in batter and fry them like chicken nuggets! The leaves can go in salads... and do you know what you can do with the roots? You can roast them in the oven until they are dry and brown – from the sugars in the root. Then you can grind them up and use them like coffee. It's actually a pretty good substitute for decaf!"

"Now it's time for a dandelion scavenger hunt. Who knows how to pull out a weed?"

[If possible, let a student explain that you have to get the root. Many kids that I work with already know this.]

"That's right, you need to get the root. That's why we have these garden spades. You push the spade down next to the dandelion and try and pull up the leaves and flowers with the root intact. Sometimes the roots are really deep and you can't get them all. That might mean the dandelion will grow back later – which isn't a big deal, since we now know that we can eat it!"

"Here are the rules for the scavenger hunt:

1. This is a team activity. I want to see how many dandelions we can all pull out – and you've only got two minutes!
2. You need to search through the garden bed first. If there are no more dandelions in the garden bed, you can look for them in the grass.
3. You can't step on the garden bed.

4. I'll let you know when the time is almost up. You need to be sitting back down in the same spot again before time is up."
5. Pile the dandelions right here so we can count them when you're done.

[When the kids have piled the dandelions and the two minutes are up, go on to another weed. If it is edible, let the kids taste it, as above. After the kids have had a chance to search for several different weeds, have them do one more hunt for any of the weeds you've already discussed. Set a time limit that will allow them to find most of the remaining weeds. By the end of the workshop, the kids should be experts at identifying the weeds you've covered.]

"OK, you guys are doing an awesome job! So now it's time to put the garden to bed. What do you think a garden uses for a blanket?" [I use salt marsh hay but you should use a type that is suitable to your garden and your region.]

"We are going to put the garden to bed using this mulch. But the plants need to have their heads poking out of the covers, so wherever you see a plant that we want to keep, make sure that its head is above the blanket."

[Show them the plants you want to keep, and show them how to spread the mulch.]

"We need to do this well, and not in a rush, but let's see if we can do a professional job in ten minutes – without crushing any plants. When you are done, I need you right back here in the circle."

While the kids are mulching the garden, you can show them some of the plants that are not weeds and have them taste bits of leafy greens, etc. It is likely that there will be a bit of hay throwing. Let the kids play within reason but be careful that it doesn't descend into chaos.

When all of the children are seated back in the circle, ask them what they learned and give them a chance to ask questions. Don't forget to thank them for doing a great job with the weeding and mulching!



Appendix

Bullet Points for Presentation

- Introduction
 - Introduce yourself and get students' names
 - Define weeds
- Discussion about individual weeds
 - Introduce the plant
 - Discuss interesting points about plant
 - If plant is edible, let children taste
 - If plant smells interesting, let the children smell
 - With a small enough group, have them look at the plant with a pocket microscope
 - Do scavenger hunt for plant (weeding)
 - Regroup and note how many weeds you collected.
 - Repeat for every weed that you want to remove
- Talk about putting the garden to bed.
- Show children how to mulch and have them do so.
- Ask the students to tell you what they learned.
- Answer any questions.
- Thank the students for doing a great job with the weeding.

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