

Lesson Plan: Art in the Garden

Overview: In a blink of your mind's eye, a youth garden can transform from a science laboratory into an innovative, ever-changing art studio. Delicate drops of dew on the petals of a rose, living fountains created by the arching blades of ornamental grasses, the mesmerizing pattern in the center of a sunflower, a graceful butterfly sipping nectar from an annual bloom.... there are many ways to "see" a garden. We can observe these everyday occurrences with the eyes of a scientist, measuring and graphing what we see. Or, with a simple change of perception, the same garden can inspire budding artists to express themselves through drawings, sculpture, and other creative media. Science laboratory or artists' muse? The garden is both — and both require the ability to notice and observe.



Grade Level/Range: K-12

Objective: Students will use the garden as an art studio to:

- Hone observation skills by documenting the changes in the garden throughout the day and year.
- Learn to appreciate how nature is constantly changing.
- Discover the many ways they can use art to express what they see and feel.

Time: 1 day to 1 year

Materials:

- Drawing paper
- An easel or clipboard
- Colored pencils, crayons or pastels

Background Information:

Gardening itself is an activity that naturally combines science and art. Gardeners must know the science behind healthy plant growth and also understand the intricate relationships between the soil and environment to properly provide for plants' needs. Additionally, gardeners hone their artistic talents as they learn to arrange and install the plant and landscape materials in attractive designs. Your youth garden is an excellent resource to engage students in visual arts. You can use your garden:

- As a textbook. The garden demonstrates the basic elements and principles of art, giving students 3-D examples to complement textbook definitions. Concepts like color, form, symmetry, and texture come to life in the garden.
- For inspiration. The garden is full of subjects and views, from colorful flowers to interesting limb structures, which can awaken creativity and inspire

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artwork. Take your students out into the garden to observe and ask them to record and express their findings visually. A wide variety of art media can be used, including sketching with pencils or pens, painting, and photography, depending on what is available to you. Create a work surface using tables, easels or clipboards, or get creative and use recycled materials like old lunchroom trays or pieces of cardboard boxes or wood scraps (watch for rough edges). The same keen eye they use for their art projects will help hone scientific observation skills too.

To Obtain Art Materials

Your garden is a great source of materials for creating works of art.

- Press flowers and use to decorate pictures and stationery.
- Harvest and dry gourds to make bird houses.
- Use marigolds, indigo, and other plant material to make natural dyes.
- Combine dried and fresh flowers and leaves in floral designs, including wreaths.
- Transform pinecones and rocks into nature pets.

The possibilities are limitless. Send students out to the garden with a bag and instructions of what they can collect. Then let their imaginations run wild in creating collages, murals, models, and more.

For Display of Art Work

Gardens are a perfect setting to display art, such as sculpture and murals. They provide a tranquil and lush setting in which to study and appreciate works of art. Art also benefits the garden. It creates focal points and complements landscape designs by adding new colors, forms, and textures. Art can also bring visual interest during winter months. Some common works of art to display in a youth garden include decorative stepping stones, painted planting containers, gazing balls, scarecrows, birdhouses, and handmade wind chimes. Creating opportunities for students to display their art in the garden increases their feelings of ownership and strengthens their investment in its upkeep.

Laying the Groundwork:

Ask students, "What are some of the changes you observed taking place in our garden?" (Possible answers: Plants grow bigger and also die; some plants lose leaves in the fall; different insects and garden creatures visit, etc.) "Does the garden look the same in the morning as it does in the afternoon?" "Where do shadows fall at different times of day?"

Exploration:

1. Claude Monet was famous for garden paintings. He featured the same scene as the subject for many of his works, but he created them at different times of the day and year, thus showing the influence of light and nature's cycles on the appearance of the garden. Show your students a few examples of his paintings available in books or online such as:

[Japanese foot-bridge over the Water-lily Pond in Giverny](#)

[Poplar Series, Trees and Poppy field Giverny](#)

[Grainstack Haystack Series](#)

[Water-lily Series I Painting in Giverny](#)

[Water-lily Series II Painting in Giverny](#)

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2. Take students out to the garden and ask them to pick a favorite spot that they would like to draw throughout the year. Give each student drawing paper, an easel or clipboard (you could also use old cafeteria trays or other inventive surfaces), and colored pencils (or crayons or pastels).

If you want to focus your students a bit more and further refine their observation skills, try a technique modeled after the work of Georgia O'Keeffe and create a frame to define their view. First, cut out a cardboard frame for each student. Ask them to place the frame in the garden, and then focus their drawing on only what is inside the frame, providing as much detail as possible.

3. Give them time to observe and then express those observations through art. Ask them to record the date and time on the corner of the picture.

4. Provide additional opportunities to observe and draw their spot at different times of the day and the year.

Making Connections

At the end of the year compile all the drawings into a journal. Ask students to write about their experiences. You can prompt them using the following questions:

- What is the same about each picture?
- What is different about each picture?
- How did your observations change over the year (more detail or less detail)?
- What are your feelings about your special garden spot?

Branching Out:

Art

Use the garden to teach about color, form and texture. Here are some activity ideas to present each topic.

Color. Bring a color wheel out to the garden and see if you find a match for all the "spokes." Create annual beds demonstrating different color combinations, such as planting annuals with warm- or cool-colored flowers, or using analogous, complementary or monochromatic color schemes. Conduct a color hunt in the garden by matching squares of paint color samples to plants. Discuss the wide variety in the shades of colors found in nature.

Form. The garden is full of different shapes, both regular and irregular. Using cardstock or heavy paper, cut out a variety of shapes, such as circles, triangles, squares, and rectangles. Give each student a shape and ask him or her to find a matching form in the garden. On a nature walk, record observations about the shapes of trees and leaves in and around your garden.

Texture. Plants provide a range of visual textures, from fine (such as those created by smaller-leaved plants like cosmos or dill) to coarse (created by larger-leaved plants like hosta or corn). You can also find a variety of tactile textures, from smooth (pepper leaves) to soft and fuzzy (lamb's ear) to rough (cucumber leaves). Collect samples of leaves with varying visual and tactile textures to display at a discovery station in the classroom.

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Make sure to avoid poisonous plants if you are working with younger children. Give students an opportunity to explore the textures and ask them to write a description of each one using at least 3 adjectives.

Science

Track the temperature and light intensity in specific places in your garden throughout the day. Visit the garden every 2 hours and record the temperature using a thermometer, and the light intensity using a light meter. Graph the results and discuss the impact the changes have on your garden both scientifically (such as how much water plants need) and visually (how light affects the appearance such as differences in perceptions of colors).

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