

Providing Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors in the Garden

You may have heard the phrase *windows and mirrors* in the context of multicultural learning. The phrase “curriculum as mirror and window” was introduced by Emily Style of the National SEED Project: “The delightful truth is that sometimes when we hear another out, glancing through the window of their humanity, we can see our own image reflected in the glass of their window. The window becomes a mirror!” (1)



Windows. When kids read and hear stories about people with *different* life experiences — for example, those from different cultures or with differently-abled bodies — it gives them a glimpse into the lived reality of others. This “window” into the world of another nurtures empathy and curiosity.

Mirrors. When kids read and hear stories that reflect their *own* life experiences, their reality is reflected back to them. This “mirror” helps them recognize and identify their place in the world and gain a sense of belonging.

When Windows Are Mirrors, Too

The real magic happens when kids learn about others and then recognize the similarities they share with them. The windows also become mirrors! This recognition dissolves boundaries, fosters deep understanding, and creates boundless opportunities for connection.

Sliding glass doors. The concept of windows and mirrors was further developed by Rudine Sims Bishop, a multicultural education scholar who coined the phrase “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors” to explain how children see themselves in books. “Sliding glass doors” describes how children can use their imagination to walk right into the world created by the author and become immersed in the characters’ experience. (2)

How Gardens Can Be Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors

These metaphors can easily transfer to a youth garden setting when you create opportunities for kids to share their stories and learn about others’ realities — and then celebrate the deep understanding and connections that inevitably follow. Here are some examples to get you started.

Grow and prepare foods from a variety of cultures. Invite kids to list some of the dishes important in their culture’s cuisine as a way to share and validate the interests of culturally diverse students. Inquire about the ingredients:

- *What type of vegetables, fruits, and/or herbs are in the dish? What qualities (flavor/texture, etc.) do each bring to the dish?*
- Have kids consider if any of the food crops could thrive in your youth garden. Have them research seed/plant sources as well as information on planting, care, and harvest.
- If you are able to grow some of the plants, invite students to bring in recipes using these ingredients.
- Grandparents and other elders are often thrilled to [share their recipes](#) and pass along their traditions. They might even be willing to visit your school or youth group to share their experiences, recipes, lore, and more!

A familiar crop, such as tomatoes, can take on multiple forms in different cuisines; for example, it might be eaten fresh in salads, cooked low-and-slow in sauces, roasted, and even used in desserts! (After all, a

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tomato is, botanically speaking, a fruit.) Some spices, such as cinnamon, are used in sweet dishes in some cultures (think apple pie) and in savory in others (think curry). Sweet potatoes are another great example, utilized in desserts like sweet potato pie, and savory foods like soups and stews. While candied sweet potatoes might make some folks think of Thanksgiving in the US, iterations of this same dish are common on dinner tables in Japan (daigaku imo), Korea (goguma mattang), China (basi digua), the Philippines (kamote Cue), Mexico (camotes enmielado), and more!

When kids get insight into both the similarities and differences in how a vegetable, fruit, herb, or spice is used in different cultures, that food becomes both a window and a mirror. When they experiment using that food in the kitchen, they get to walk through the sliding glass door and into a new, exciting world!

Cultivate culturally-significant plants. Ask kids, *Are there special plants in your culture that are used not only in foods, but also in rituals and celebrations?* Most cultures use specific plants during special occasions, such as displaying evergreens at Christmastime or marigolds during Dia de los Muertos or Diwali. Ask youth to create a list of plants, inviting them to ask relatives and others in their community to contribute their ideas and memories, too.

- Are there special plants displayed during certain [holidays](#)? How are they used? What is their significance?
- Do certain herbs play a special role in cuisines and celebrations?
- Can any of these plants be grown in your youth garden?

Learning about another culture's practices during important events, such as holidays and weddings, helps kids broaden their horizons. Invite them to ponder, *Which traditions cross many cultures, and which are unique to a particular cultural group? Can you respectfully recreate any rituals?* Such sharing and learning also help kids view their own culture's traditions with fresh eyes. Best of all, it's so much fun!

Broaden your garden design and decor to be culturally inclusive. A group activity creating plant labels in all the languages spoken by the kids in your school or youth group is one way to make all kids and their families feel welcome. Here are some other ideas:

- A [Three Sisters Garden](#) is a clear example of the wisdom and ingenuity of the Cherokee and Haudenosaunee people, among others. The planting shows great knowledge of not only how plants grow, but also how they (and humans!) benefit when we understand both our needs *and* what we can offer to others. Consider connecting with indigenous groups in your area and inviting members to the garden to share their traditional agricultural practices and the significance of local native plants within their culture.
- Colors, color combinations, and color patterns have great cultural significance. Not only are they represented in national flags, but they are also important symbols of inclusion — think rainbow flags. Ask students, *What colors have meaning to you and your community/culture? What plants can we grow to feature those colors?*

Garden design isn't just about aesthetics; it can also embrace and honor cultures and make everyone feel welcome and safe.

Broadening horizons through garden-related books. By choosing books that celebrate the histories, experiences, and everyday life of their students, their communities, and the world as a whole, educators can help kids embrace diversity, honor cultural contributions, and promote empathy. Here are some tips for choosing diverse and inclusive books (adapted [from Reach Out and Read](#)).

Look for books that:

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- Include characters of color, LGBTQIA+ characters, female protagonists, or characters with disabilities — especially books where these are the main characters.
- Are written by authors of color, authors with disabilities, female authors, or LGBTQIA+ authors.
- Feature people of color, LGBTQIA+ characters, female characters, or characters with disabilities on the cover.
- Can serve as both “mirrors” and “windows” — books in which children can see themselves reflected and in which they can learn about others.
- Include books where characters’ identities are not the main focus of the storyline: i.e. main characters that use wheelchairs in stories that don’t center around their accessibility needs and instead center them in storylines about living full lives.
- Steer clear of hurtful racial or ethnic stereotypes, overgeneralizations, or images.

Broadening Horizons Benefits All

Through the metaphor of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors, educators can embrace diversity, honor various cultures, and promote empathy.

The world is multicultural, and if all children are to thrive, they need to understand not only people from their own culture, but also those from other cultures. All children are left at a disadvantage when there’s a scarcity of books and other resources featuring characters from various cultures and backgrounds.

Using the metaphor of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors, educators can enable all youth to see not only their own reality (in the mirror), but also the reality of those around them (through the window). And best of all, they might even be able to step through the sliding glass door to immerse themselves in a new and exciting world!

Related Article

[Using Garden Books as Mirrors and Windows](#)
[Gift Guide: Garden Books](#)
[Celebrating the Heritage of Hispanic Foods](#)
[Creating Signs for Culturally Relevant Plants](#)

References:

- (1) Emily Style, *Curriculum As Window and Mirror*, first published in *Listening for All Voices*, Oak Knoll School monograph, Summit, NJ, 1988. <https://nationalseedproject.org/itemid-fix/entry/curriculum-as-window-and-mirror>
- (2) Rudine Sims Bishop, *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors*, The Ohio State University, 1990 <https://scenicregional.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Mirrors-Windows-and-Sliding-Glass-Doors.pdf>

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