The Outdoor Environment

Welcome to the Forest, our outdoor classroom. It’s named the Forest for its lush green grass and full shady trees. What? You don’t believe it. It’s true. However, when the construction began on that building next us, the water was shut off. Our Forest died. Now it is a sad, dry desert. How can we breathe life back into it?

Nature (and the children) answered that for us. During the big rains of 2010, we were blessed with a rainbow every morning for three days in a row. The magic off rainbows emptied out our school. Dozens of little feet stood in puddles and huddled under umbrellas to watch in awe.

As the children entered the classrooms again, the rainbow worked its magic and began to appear in their artwork.
The rains leave the Forest ready to turn green. Geared up to plant, I ask Donovan, “What kind of flowers do you want in our garden?” I assume he will ask for his favorite color, yellow. His answer surprises me. “Butterfly flowers.” We rush to the office, I know just where to find a book on “Butterfly flowers.” For a few days, the Turtle family browses through gardening books to inspire ideas. Sigi agrees with Donovan. She chooses a butterfly garden as well. But then that rainbow works its magic.

Towards the back of a book is a perfect little square garden. Jacob comes to life and demands, “That one!” I look down and read the name of the garden...The Rainbow Garden. It is set. We are on our way to create a Rainbow Garden with butterfly flowers.
Parents are asked to bring in seeds of various colors. The children mix the colors of the rainbow from their three primary colors. Edie loves blue and paint her plate diligently covering every nook and cranny. “Green like my shirt,” Junior sorts and categorizes the colors.

Uh-oh. There’s a problem for our Rainbow Garden, “No hay verde,” Roberto observes the empty green plate. What will we do?
As we prepare the soil for the seeds, we find that there is all this stuff in the dirt. What do we find?

Existing ‘flowers’, worms, beetle larvae, and the famous and much beloved roly pollies.

Using the language of play dough the children investigate these curious little creatures.
“I found something,”

Roberto calls out. He digs deeper and deeper with a frantic urgency. Robin A dives in to help out. The children gather around. Roberto pushes the shovel into the dry earth. The object rocks back and forth with each thrust. “I got it!” What is it? “It’s a dinosaur bone.”
What Is A Sunflower?

Fresh flowers are brought in for the children to explore. Lila and Miranda smell them while Dimitri runs his fingers gently through the petals before pulling them off.
Thomas holds the stem in his hands and pulls the green leaf off releasing the sunflowers odor into the room. Dimitri has continued to shred the flower down to the base, “It’s green!”
Flower Inspirations
The paint is mixed by Priscilla, Robin C, and the teacher. At each step the color is tested against the petals and the, “Honey” of the flower.
Priscilla (aka Gina, aka Pony) traces the flower.
The exploration continues through different mediums.
I know that sunflowers grow excellent at the CDC. Plus, I love the different heights that they can grow. I bring in five different sizes. Eighteen inches, three feet, five feet, seven feet, and TWELVE feet. Can you tell which seed will grow to 12 feet? Kami, Kory, and Priscilla investigate the seeds by holding them and discussing their color and sizes. “You can’t eat these!” Kami laughs at the teacher. They dig a lovely horizontal hole and count out, “One, two. Three, four, five, six.” At each step they drop one seed.
“How Will the Children Know That We’ve Planted Flowers Here?”

“Make a sign” Ivy calls out confidently. “What will we need?” The children become scattered with the excitement of a caterpillar find. Our day comes to an end with out an answer.

However, first thing next morning Savannah enters with the magic of a child’s imagination, “I need to see Mrs. Ward.” She demands this with all the fight of a sassy three year old. She returns with a stack of hard paper, wooden sticks, and some blue tape. She and Chloe sit on the floor and begin to work. “We need to make signs”

This sign clearly shows the yellow sunflower seed in the pokey brown dirt.
Taking Care of Our Flowers

With no water supply directly in the Forest, the children spend a lot of happy time trekking back and forth from the outdoor sink. “It’s heavy” Mea tells us. “Would you like help?” “No. I’m strong” she tells us.
Have you seen me growing in your garden?
Christopher takes care of the garden by watering it. He finds a rainbow in the water. A rainbow for a rainbow garden.
The fruit of our hard work, a beautiful sunflower.
The Cycle of Life

We plant our garden, take care of it, and enjoy it together. All things that grow change, transform, and leave a piece of it for tomorrow. As summer comes to an end the flowers begin to wither leaving us with seeds to explore next season.

Being outdoors offers children an opportunity to observe all the wonders of nature. The children are instinctually attracted to the natural world and its many discoveries. It engages all of the senses. Can you hear the harmony of the birds’ song? Take a deep breath and smell the Earth after the gentle rains and imagine your bare feet walking across the cool green grass. The outdoors inspire.

The end of summer also brings us to the end of another school year. Children we have nurtured and loved grow and move on to the older classes and then to kindergarten. But as the sunflower gives us seeds for our garden, the children’s memories stay with us forever planted in the rainbow garden.