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Educating the Next Generation[©]

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Every generation has its challenges in education. It's said that our current generation has lost its connection to the natural world because it is plugged into so many electronic diversions. A generation also will not protect something in their lives that they do not know or love.

We have all heard of "no child left behind" in education, but there is now a national movement to "leave no child inside." This is currently a focus of the Obama Administration's "A 21st Century Strategy for America's Great Outdoors," <<http://www.doi.gov/americangreatoutdoors/>>, also with Capitol Hill hearings, legislation on the state level, and grassroots organizations.

In the book "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder" by Richard Louv (2006), he brings together the studies showing that direct exposure to nature is essential for a child's healthy physical and emotional development. They have recently linked the lack of nature in children's lives with the rise in obesity, attention disorders, and depression.

New ideas and programs are being developed to address this. One such new program is the California Native Plant Society's (CNPS) development of a curriculum that teaches kids to become observers of nature. They pointed out that if you ask a kindergarten class if they can draw they will all raise their hands. If you ask the same question to a sixth grade class very few will think they can draw and that drawing is for only a gifted few. John Muir Laws, a naturalist, educator, and artist, and Emily Breunig, a teacher for the California Institute for Biodiversity, have developed a curriculum for kids 8 years old and up. The curriculum integrates observation of nature using art, language arts, and science. The curriculum can be downloaded from the education page of the CNPS web site: <<http://www.cnps.org/cnps/education/>>.

Educators have expressed that the experiences with nature have to be repeated through a child's education to make a long-term impact on them. Reflect back on how you got into the field of horticulture. What childhood experiences could have led you on this path? What can we do in our profession to help pass on the knowledge and love of botany and horticulture?

Here is an example of what can be done on a local level; fast forward to Winthrop, Washington. Winthrop is a small rural town on the northeastern side of the Washington Cascades 30 miles as a crow flies from the Canadian border. It has a mix of agriculture, recreation, and forestry industries. This is a rich shrub-steppe plant community. It is important for the children to know the plants with which they coexist, what are their significant uses for wildlife, and what do they need to germinate and grow. This understanding will help preserve this environment and increase their appreciation of their surroundings.

The plan was to develop a shrub-steppe landscape garden from seed collection to installing the garden. This garden would be used as a teaching garden in the future. The recipe for the plan included a dedicated first-year teacher, Erica Bleke, who graduated from Western Washington University with a degree in