HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

POWER OF YOUTH

We’ve just finished spring break and even thought there are still two months of school, students are ready for summer. "Why stay inside when the weather is nice and learn things that don’t even matter?" If you have children, you have probably heard this story many times.

There are many lessons to be learned indoors, but our outdoor classroom holds the key to life long learning. Share the outdoors with your children and you expose them to many life lessons. Shhhhh, we don’t want them to know they are learning.

During spring break, local 4-Hers participated in a variety of activities related to gardening, wildlife and forestry. Yes, they wanted to learn, even though school was out.

The youth saw the difference between the three leaflet poison ivy vine growing along Bill Beck Boulevard and the attractive five leaflet native Virginia creeper vine that is a recommended landscape plant. They observed that both had red petioles, the stalk that attaches leaves to stems. Knowing the difference could prevent days of itching and possibly be a matter of life or death. Shhhhh. They were learning to compare and contrast, skills which are required for FCAT tests and survival in Florida woodlands.

Succession is the change in landscape plant composition over time. Plants seed into bare ground and based on adaptations, woody plants may take over to develop into mature forests. The youth experienced plant succession as they walked through grasses and forbes (soft stemmed weeds) replacing bare ground after construction. They could see how shrubs and trees moved into areas over time. They were learning about processes, sequences and order.

They discovered through research that wild turkeys need open space with new growth to feed since they like bugs which come to chew on new tender shoots. Turkeys need older trees to roost in addition to the open areas for bugging. They could relate this to their world as we discussed separate spaces at home for eating and sleeping. At school, teachers often look for ways to relate concepts to real world situations the students can relate to.

They thought about food chains and wildlife habitat needs and learned that a diversity in plant arrangement both vertically and horizontally is important for different types of wildlife. By drawing pictures to illustrate the needs of wild turkeys, they demonstrated that they learned, and they were not in class.

They observed hundreds of eastern tent caterpillars with protective coloration marching up the trunks of oak trees. Protective coloration mimics some natural pattern to disguise animals from predators. Once the kids recognized the pattern, the caterpillars were easy to spot, collect and watch as they ate tender oak leaves for dinner, and breakfast and lunch and afternoon snacks, etc. They were studying biology up close and in person while practicing observation skills.

While walking through the woods, the youth saw insects attracted to the new flowers of sorrel, commonly called sourgrass because the chewed stems taste sour like lemons. They tasted the tender shoots of the thorny smilax vine which some call forest asparagus. I explained that they should not eat plants from their yard or the woods unless a trusted adult approves.

While the berries of the smilax vine are a food source for wildlife, the rapid growing vine is a nuisance to home landscapes and land managers. They observed the invasive exotic plant commonly called Brazilian pepper that reproduces so rapidly in natural areas. It is a threat to native habitats because it replaces native plants therefore reducing biodiversity and displaces native wildlife. They discovered that little brothers and sisters are not the only pests in the world.
They compared the number of pine needles in fascicles (clusters) to identify pine trees. They learned that long leaf pine needles are in groups of three needles and look like cheer leader pompoms at the end of the branches. Slash pines have two to three needles in fascicles and the needles grow down the branches instead of just at the tips.

These kids were not studying for school, but instead, wanted to learn more about their natural world. Field trips, games and woods walks helped them learn some of the same requirements that are needed for achievement tests. They went on to participate in the State 4-H Forest Ecology Contest and the Wildlife Habitat Evaluation Contest; for fun, not a grade.

If it is fun, they will learn, in the classroom or outdoors.

Teachers are invited to use our hands-on 4-H activities to reinforce their required curriculum. Workshops are scheduled for Wednesday, April 2 and April 16 to share ideas for activities that reinforce the Sunshine State Standards through fun. Contact Christy Walter, Family and Consumer Sciences/4-H agent with the University of Florida/IFAS Osceola County Extension Office at 321-697-3000. She coordinates our school enrichment programs and materials are available for loan throughout the year.

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