

Environmental Education Update

At Martineau Gardens, we run an Environmental Education programme that is linked to the curriculum, taught by experienced education professionals, and provides sensory hands-on learning activities. Children learn about aspects such as where their food comes from, parts of plants, pollination, composting, map skills, invertebrate sampling (including pond dipping), classification and identification. They engage with nature through learning and play, and develop an awareness of environmental sustainability.

“Prior to the trip, pupils studied animal classification in Science. Not only were pupils asked questions about this, but they were also taught many interesting facts about insects before their minibeast hunt. After the visit, pupils learnt the lifecycle of types of animals in more detail. The pupils particularly enjoyed learning about the lifecycle of an amphibian since some children had found and held a newt while pond dipping.” (Year 5 teacher, detailing the links with work at school)

Background

Martineau Gardens was originally the grounds of a teachers' centre, set up in the 1950s to attract teachers to post-war Birmingham. It later became an environmental studies centre for school groups to visit, where they could learn about a variety of habitats – in fact, our 2.5 acre site has always had a range of different habitats including ponds and a SLINC (Site of Local Interest for Nature Conservation) woodland, plus allotment areas and herb beds. During the 1980s it even had animals including goats and sheep (on the current play area, which was originally a tennis court for teachers), plus more exotic creatures inside the classroom building.

We have been running our current Environmental Education programme since 2015, where we offer the following 8 early years / primary teaching sessions, plus occasional additional bespoke sessions (usually for secondary or special school groups). These are adapted for different age groups, to match the objectives of the curriculum:

- Minibeast Safari
- Be a Plant Professor
- Habitat Explorers
- Pirate Adventure!
- Adaptation, Evolution & Classification (KS2)
- Dinosaur Discovery (EYFS)
- Senses Safari (EYFS)
- Stick Man (EYFS)

Academic year 2024-25

By the end of this academic year, we will have welcomed more than 1650 children from 50 schools (primary and special), home education groups, nurseries and uniformed clubs (e.g. Squirrel Scouts, Beaver Scouts, Brownies). The children have learnt about where their food comes from, including tasting and smelling herbs; hunted for minibeads on land and in the pond; explored a variety of habitats; identified trees and wildflowers; used maps to help them hunt for buried pirate treasure; played in the sandpit and on the shipwreck; carried outdoor maths activities; tried barefoot walks; and sieved compost for our gardeners to use.

This year, we made the decision to offer visits to larger groups, on request, which has helped schools with costs of coaches. Luckily the weather has been kind to us on most of the days when we've had 60 children on site, rather than the usual 30! We have also expanded our Education Team and now have 7 people who lead teaching the sessions and tours, many of whom are current or retired teachers, or have experience of working with young people.

Many of the children who visit us come from areas of economic and green deprivation. They do not often have access to safe, biodiverse green spaces and we see how much being outside during a visit to Martineau Gardens benefits them, both educationally and in terms of their improved wellbeing.

Quotes to demonstrate impact

Children's quotes:

"Best day ever!!"

"The composting was the most fun part. We even got to sieve it!"

"We got to taste the mint and the peas and they smelled so fresh".

"Martineau Gardens taught me that nature is powerful, and we can all help protect it."

"I enjoyed using the magnifying glass to find the veins on the leaves. Humans have veins and the leaves have veins too. Plants help us and we help plants."

"I learnt that insects are important in our world. They help with pollination. This means plants can make more plants, which helps us."

"The leaves on Yew trees look different to the leaves on Horse Chestnut trees."

"I identified flowers such as Crocuses, Snowdrops and Hellebores. I didn't know the names of the plants before and what they look like. Now I know."

"I saw chives growing and I tasted some. They are used in flavour for crisps. I tasted the flavour before, but I didn't know what it looked like."

Teachers' quotes:

"This outdoor experience not only enriched [the children's] understanding of science and geography but also motivated them to take sustainable actions back at school."

"[When the children explored the compost heap] they were introduced to the role of invertebrates and microorganisms in breaking down organic material. They observed worms, beetles, and other small creatures and learned how these organisms transform food waste into nutrient-rich compost. 'It's like nature's recycling system!' one student exclaimed. This activity linked directly to their classroom learning about decomposition and environmental sustainability."

"The visit to Martineau Gardens was a transformative experience for Year 5. It not only reinforced their curriculum learning but also empowered them to take environmental action."

"Children with SEND were provided with an environment which was not intimidating, overwhelming or restrictive and were able to explore as much as they were comfortable, including pushing through some sensory issues to try new things."