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Wild Ones®

NATIVE PLANTS, NATURAL LANDSCAPES

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Celebrating natives plant and natural landscapes since 1979.

THENEXT GENERATION
Five, Six, Pick Up Sticks

By Barbara Bray

A few years ago, two neighborhood boys came to my door asking if they could pick up sticks in my back yard to earn money. I agreed and let them use my wheelbarrow. After they had filled the wheelbarrow, they wanted to get rid of the sticks. Imagine their surprise when I told them I wanted the sticks for my new woodland garden area. They stared at me in utter disbelief, but I explained that the sticks were like a treasure from Mother Nature and not something to be thrown away.

Sticks are not unfamiliar to us. In fact, we are surrounded by sticks as my children happily point out – chopsticks, carrot sticks, pick up sticks, pretzel sticks, glue sticks, hockey sticks – just to name a few! But these are the "sticks" of civilization – perhaps a reminder of our earlier connections to the natural world. Think back to your childhood and the rhyme: "One, two, buckle your shoe. Three, four, shut the door. Five, six, pick up sticks. Seven, eight, lay them straight. Nine, ten, a good fat hen…" This rhyme seems to beckon children to leave the house and go outside, maybe to do chores or maybe to play, but good advice either way. Sticks are perfectly sized for children to handle, plus they are full of interesting things like beetle- larvae tunnels and millipedes.

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Plain old sticks have an almost limitless number of applications. I use large sticks to mark planting areas and smaller sticks to discourage nibbling critters such as rabbits and deer. Kids, however, will take these same sticks and use them in a hundred different ways. Sticks piled across a small stream become bridges to cross or dams to hold back water. Small sticks float downstream as boats and rafts. On land, sticks become the building materials for small shelters, pretend campfires, and even "hidden traps" (a hole covered with sticks). Sticks are also balance beams to walk on, walking sticks to hike with, and tools to write with in the dirt. Sticks can be piled, sorted, collected, colored, painted, and glued. Not bad for something that is absolutely free.

But do sticks offer even more? Might they not be a back door route to learning about nature? Let me illustrate with another story that took place last year. My son Ben went outside one day, picked up a stick, and started swinging it back and forth in an overgrown corner of our yard. I eventually discovered that he was fighting an enemy – Canada thistle. Canada thistle? Yes, at 10 years old, Ben has started battling an invasive plant in our yard with a stick! This is such fun that he even recruits his friends to go outside with him to "whack the weeds." While a few innocent plants probably have suffered a whacking or two, something unexpected has resulted from this experience.

In the process of looking for thistles to cut down, the kids have unintentionally learned to identify other plants such as goldenrods, raspberries, and cottonwood seedlings. They also are learning about native and non-native plants and successional plant communities. Best of all, these lessons come naturally and in the form of play, which is much better than me giving a lecture. Invite your children to play with sticks too, and watch what happens.

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