



FortWhyte Alive
HUMAN NATURE.

Naturescape for Educators

bringing biodiversity into the schoolyard

Outdoor Classrooms

Building an Outdoor Classroom



Teach with the wind in your hair and the sun on your face using a set location in the schoolyard for learning! Research shows the positive effects of learning near a window, so imagine the benefit of learning outdoors. An outdoor classroom could be anything from a circle of benches to a fully constructed pergola as long as it is outdoors and a regular place for students to go as a class.

Getting Started

Answer these questions before construction begins:

1. How much space do you need?

Ensure there is adequate space for the largest class in the school and keep in mind any future thoughts of expanding. Is there enough space for a portable whiteboard or extra equipment?

2. Where should you build?

Double check the landscape to guarantee the classroom will not be built in a low, and possibly flooded, portion of the schoolyard. Ensure there is adequate shelter. Wind and sun are obstacles to successful outdoor lessons. Ensure the outdoor classroom has protection from strong wind and a spot to find shade. Surrounding trees may be an effective shelter, or you may choose to build a roof.

3. Do you need a writing surface?

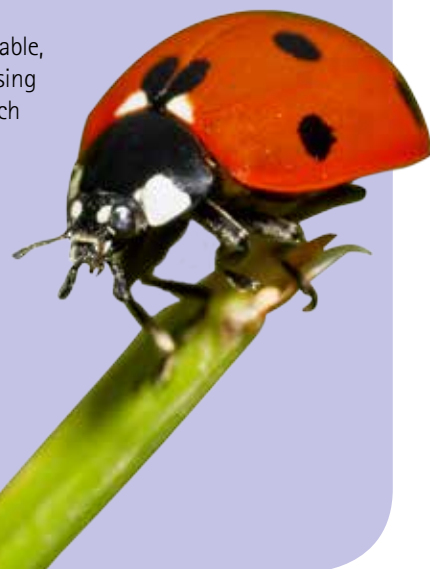
Tables are a helpful feature in an outdoor classroom. However, if tables are not desirable, clipboards may be a viable option. Simple clipboards can be purchased or built using corrugated board and butterfly clips. For younger students, it may be helpful to attach a pencil to the board with string. Smaller, portable whiteboards allow you to draw, write, and demonstrate for your students.

4. Do you want to promote independent or group study?

Tree stumps for example, are immovable and separate preventing students from sitting or working together but allowing for individual working space. Picnic tables encourage group work but may limit the efficacy of individual work.

5. What type of seating orientation would best suit your needs?

A semi-circle is a typical orientation for an outdoor classroom however it is not the only option. Discuss the uses and needs you will have with the staff and students to determine what would best fit your school.



Tips and Tricks

There are two equally effective ways of using an outdoor classroom:

1. Plan a lesson specifically for the outdoors: use the outdoor space around your school as a teaching tool, e.g. measure landscape features as a math lesson using triangles.
2. Use the outdoors for your previously planned lesson: your outdoor classroom is a teaching venue, much as any other space in or around your school, e.g. using your whiteboards and student clipboards, teach a math lesson explaining measurement.

Either way, with planning and preparation, your outdoor lesson is bound to be successful if you follow these few, simple tips and tricks:

Generally, **pencils** are better to use outside than pens. Pens can explode if dropped and will run if you are caught in the rain.

Face towards the sun when giving instruction so that students do not have the sun in their eyes while listening.

FortWhyte Alive offers Outdoor Educator professional development workshops and consultations to help you make the most of your time teaching outside. Each workshop is customized for your school.

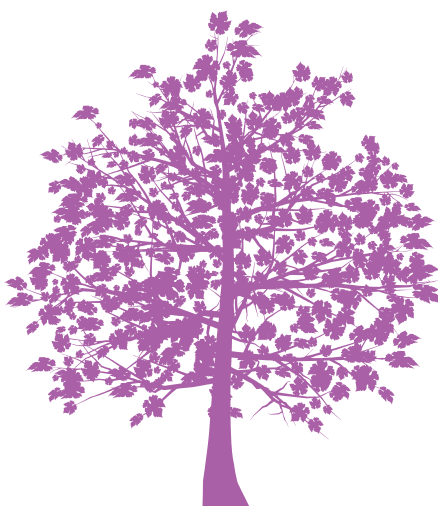
There will likely be occasions where **nature becomes more interesting than the lesson.** Instead of fighting those occurrences, choose to use them as teachable moments and teach to the students' curiosity.

Strong wind can also make it difficult to keep items on tables or clipboards. Try using elastic over clipboards to hold paper still or gather rocks as paperweights. Having accessory items in sealable bin containers will keep everything intact and together until you need to use it.

Strong wind can make it hard for students to hear instruction. Consider giving instruction inside before venturing outside on very windy days or simply talk so that the students are down wind.

Ideas for the Outdoor Classrooms

For the Shelter...



pergola

TREES

willow hut

canvas tent

For the Seats...

MEADOW

TARP

hay bales

benches

tree logs

picnic tables

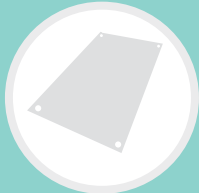
ROCKS

TREE
STUMPS

metal chairs
and tables

If You're Not Ready to Build...

A permanent outdoor classroom is a big commitment, and requires a sizeable investment of time, space, and money. To better use your schoolyard as a teaching space tomorrow, consider the following suggestions:



Terrific Tarps

If you use tabletops/desk groups in the classroom, consider using different coloured tarps as seating and workspaces outside. Each tarp can correspond to a table or desk group inside; this familiarity will help students make the transition to outdoor learning more quickly.



Comfy Cushions

Inexpensive, individual water and dirt-resistant cushions can be found in most outdoor stores. If you use individual desks in the classroom, consider using clipboards and cushions to bring "desks" outside.



Pitch Your Idea

...by pitching a tent! A canvas tent is semi-permanent. Renting or buying a tent will involve some investment, but less than a permanent outdoor classroom. A big school tent can let you see how much an outdoor classroom will be used, how it will be used, and if vandalism might be a problem before you build a permanent structure. Some schools use tipis, which bring cultural elements to their outdoor teaching space, too!



Start Small

A few garden boxes or beds students can visit frequently will get them used to the idea of doing school work outside. Looking at your schoolyard's natural attributes can establish learning areas that do not require building or serious landscaping. For instance, do you have an area of shrubs? If so, you have a mini-forest, perfect for natural science lessons and experiments. Is there soggy patch of soccer field in the spring? Take advantage of your seasonal wetland by learning about frog lifecycles and mosquito life cycles.



Ask Around

Are there other community groups that would use your space? The more people in and around your school community that take an interest in your plan, the better. The best-used and most-loved outdoor classrooms seem to be those supported by the whole town or neighbourhood.



Sample Classroom



Shelter

Teaching Garden

Seating

Storage

Photo courtesy of Wildwood School of Los Angeles, California.