

## **Native Plants in the Schoolyard: how these vibrant hubs of learning are used in every classroom, and have been embraced by faculty, staff, and families**

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The native gardens at Prospect Sierra School have become vibrant hubs of learning and creativity since their installation in 2013. Over time, as more areas have been transformed into native plant habitats, the gardens have blossomed into dynamic spaces for interdisciplinary exploration, bringing the curriculum to life for our students.

Even our youngest learners, starting in Transitional Kindergarten (TK), take pride in caring for these spaces. Guided by their teachers, TK students plant, water, and weed the garden in front of their classroom as part of a service project inspired by a schoolwide book study. This hands-on work fosters a sense of ownership and curiosity as they observe visiting insects and birds. In art class, they explore nature's textures, like redwood cones, to create unique art pieces.

Kindergarteners step into the role of weather watchers, connecting local weather patterns to the health of native plants. They venture into the nearby park for nature walks, comparing it to the schoolyard and learning to identify native species like live oaks, monkeyflowers, and rushes. They also learn how native animals need these plants for shelter and food.

By 1st grade, students develop a sharper eye for identifying and removing invasive weeds, ensuring the native plants thrive. In science, they dive into the fascinating world of pollinators, comparing honeybee colonies to native wild bees. The garden becomes a living lab where students observe bees interacting with plants like sages, buckwheats, and poppies.

In 2nd grade, students graduate to using more advanced tools and take on planting new natives with confidence. They deepen their understanding of leaf structures, colors, scents, and flower patterns. Their science studies on the water cycle connect directly to advocating for water conservation through native gardening. In art class, they create intricate mixed-media projects inspired by their observations of native flowers and foliage.

The connection to the gardens deepens even further in 3rd grade, as students explore indigenous knowledge and the cultural significance of native plants. They learn how native plants were and continue to be used for food, medicine, and more, linking these lessons to broader themes of sustainability and reciprocal relationships. The study of indigenous farming techniques, such as the Three Sisters method, enriches their understanding of how humans can work in harmony with nature. This knowledge even takes center stage in their drama class, where lessons about native trees inspire the annual 3rd-grade play. Classroom table groups are named after native plants, sparking curiosity as students search for "their" plants on campus.

By 4th grade, students take on leadership roles, tending to milkweed plants and observing monarch butterfly life cycles. They share their expertise during Earth Day celebrations, inspiring the entire school community to become better environmental stewards. These empowered changemakers learn that small efforts, like planting natives, can lead to big environmental impacts.

The enthusiasm for native gardening doesn't stop with the students. Faculty, staff, and families have embraced the movement, volunteering for regular maintenance days and incorporating native plants into their own home gardens. Our facilities team actively prioritizes native plants in campus updates, ensuring our grounds reflect our commitment to sustainability.

The native gardens at Prospect Sierra aren't just landscapes—they're living classrooms, spaces for creativity, and catalysts for environmental change. They demonstrate how even small, intentional steps can transform a school community and inspire a deeper connection to the natural world.