

A Garden for Children

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

Many adults remember back to childhood, when they received their very first allowance. Starting to get money weekly was a big deal! Concealed within that exciting moment, parents began teaching children practical lessons about financial accountability: spend it all immediately on small things or save for a future purchase. Invest some of that money in a bank account and watch it accumulate interest. Life lessons also start when children have their first pet—not the family dog or cat, but a goldfish, small mammal, or some other animal primarily under the child's care. That pet teaches commitment and responsibility.

A plot of land as little as 6x6 feet can make a phenomenal first garden for a youngster while providing additional, practical life's lessons. This garden is a perfect way for kids to learn about healthy land stewardship, responsibility, and discovering nature. It offers an opportunity to watch plants grow from seed, whether the germination starts indoors or directly in outdoor soil. Children see which plants like sun or shade, and which ones prefer different watering requirements. Invest some time and creativity and this backyard classroom can be the foundation for a science project. For example, how many local pollinators does a daffodil (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*), a European species, attract?

Despite the showy yellow blossom, the answer is **zero!** None of the native bees, butterflies, beetles, or other insects recognize daffodils as a food source. On the other hand, Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*) are abuzz with pollinators, even though both bluebells and daffodils are spring ephemerals, blooming in the spring and enter dormancy by early summer. No fair using this experiment since its conclusion is published here, but countless others awaiting a youngster's questions and revelation of the answers. A good way to measure a plant's beneficial quality is to count the number of times it gets visited within a given time. Using the flower visitation experiment as an example, watch three or four flowers or clusters for small blossoms—and only those flowers, not a neighboring one on the same plant—for 15 minutes and tally how many times it is visited by an insect. Regardless if the same insect jumps from one flower to the next and back again, each one of those stops counts as one visitation event.

Whenever possible, determine if that insect is feeding from the flower or simply landing on it. For example, a dragonfly only eats other insects so when it lands on a flower, that blossom is a perch instead of a food source. Determining which major order of insect (e.g., beetles, true flies, bees, etc.) can be significant because some flowers feed only certain types of insects. Check for munching, nesting, and other activity elsewhere on the plants, such as the foliage. Follow this garden along with the changing seasons and over the next few years as projects that collect data across long periods are often viewed favorably by teachers and science fair judges. When testing out non-native plants, never use [invasive species](#) since they can get out of control fast, including seeds escaping the property only to start infestations in previously unspoiled natural areas. Another taboo is leaving an empty plot to naturally fill with plants; while this method used to be a good idea, now invasive species are sure to pop up from seeds brought by birds, the wind, or even shoes after the wearer previously walked through a contaminated area.

In addition to pollinators, the young scholar sees how a native garden draws other wildlife—from the insects foraging on the plants to the predators keeping the herbivore population in check. With a nice bed

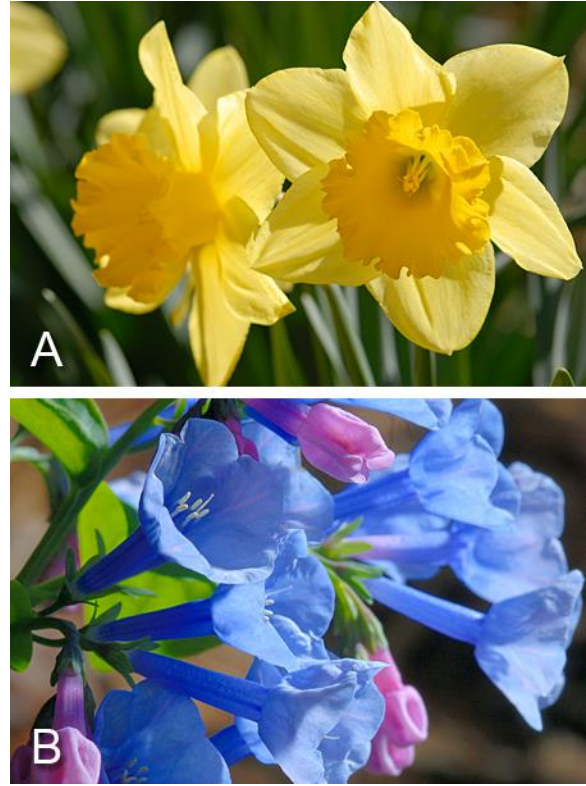


Figure 1. Though it may be pretty, a hillside of daffodils (A) is ecologically worthless while a few, smaller bluebell blossoms (B) draw in speedy, pollinating bees.

of leaf mulch otop, notice how many birds inspect that tiny garden, flipping leaves and looking for a buggy meal during colder months, compared to a grassy lawn or pavement. What other critters seek shelter in this little [habitat island](#)? A small study site still offers daily discoveries, as David Haskell illustrates in his book, *The Forest Unseen*, where he visits a circular old growth forest patch a bit wider than a meter throughout a year. A magnifying glass or microscope further opens more worlds.

Perhaps the child would like to have a food garden. That is how some farmers got their start—by easily growing fruits and vegetables only to have people buy their goods. A student can learn from raising food gardens plus have pride when he or she produces his or her first tomato and basil salad for the family! Will the garden be plowed or no-till? What are the challenges and benefits of “going organic?” What happens when, over the winter, the top is bare, mulched, or has a cover crop? How about hydroponics? If a problem arises, what went wrong and how is it fixed?

Any type of garden helps kids become enlightened, get fresh air, and exercise while the parents can rest easy knowing their children are safe. Very important: always keep the garden on the parents' property. **Never dig on or cut into parkland or other places without that landowner's permission.** With some imagination, the possibilities of this child's backyard garden are endless!

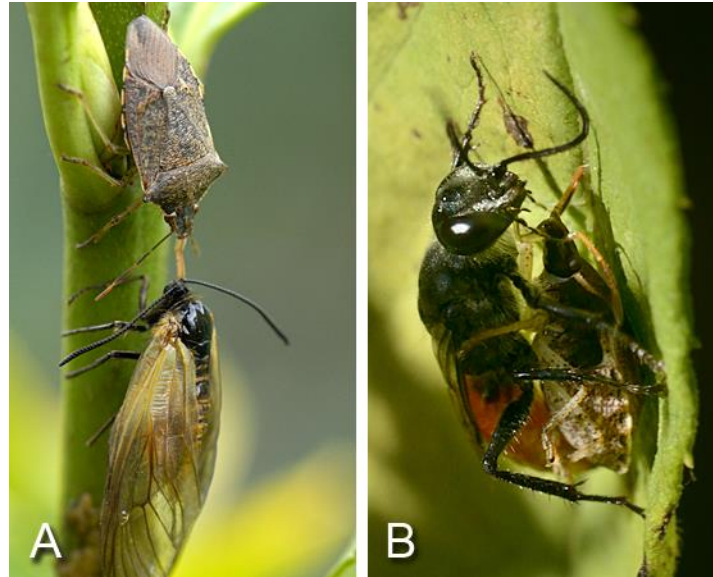


Figure 2. Folks often think of stink bugs being plant-eaters and moths having opaque wings. In this garden, a carnivorous native stink bug, the spined soldier bug (*Podisus maculiventris*), sucks the juices out of a clearwing moth (A). The tables are turned when the soldier bug falls prey to an ichneumon wasp (B).



Figure 3. Which critters will a garden dominated with native plants entice? It could be (A) an arrow-shaped micrathena, (B) a bicolor sweat bee, seen here on a New England aster, or (C) a red-lined salamander. What will you find in your garden?

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