



Alternatives to Wildflower Collecting: Is Wildflower Collecting A Good School Activity?

As spring breezes freshen the air, coaxing the first wildflowers to bloom, the annual hunting season -- for wildflowers -- begins. Each year, thousands of wildflowers fall prey to eager students busily picking and pressing in the hopes of high grades. Once completed and graded, these collections often lie unused and forgotten, collecting dust on a shelf, or permanently filed in the trash.

How useful are wildflower collections as school projects? Do students actually attain a better understanding of plants through collecting wildflowers? Are there alternatives to collecting that would be more beneficial to the student and less destructive to the environment?

The most important aspect of wildflower collecting is the opportunity for students to get outside and see plants growing in their natural habitats and interacting with the surrounding components (other plants, insects, birds, etc.). Too often, natural sciences curricula neglect the study of whole organisms in order to focus on their structural aspects. Yet the goal of assigned collections usually tends to emphasize quantity over any other factors. In the rush to overwhelm teachers with sheer numbers of specimens, students learn little about important concepts such as the ecology of plants, characteristics of plant families, or even plant names.

How can wildflower collecting or alternative projects instill a longer lasting impression on students? Below are a few suggestions of alternatives to plant collections.

- Emphasize the process and value of wildflower collections, rather than the quantity. Detailed notes on location, habitat, collector, etc., are just as important as the plant itself. You may want to start a mini-herbarium (dried plant library) as a class or school project that subsequent classes can add to in succeeding years. Collect flowers as a group instead of individually.
- Wildflower flashcards, made by taping pressed specimens or wildflower pictures from magazines onto index cards and labeling the cards with the plant names on the back, may be a more useful way to learn how to identify wildflowers. The cards can be filed in a box in the classroom for future reference.
- Photographing wildflowers, although expensive, is another option, especially for older students.
- Photocopies of wildflowers provide enough detail for recall and are an easy way to make a simple identification guide that can be reused.
- A wildflower planting on the school grounds provides an excellent opportunity to learn about plants and study them over time. Caring for their own wildflowers will instill in students a greater appreciation for plants in the wild.

With a little creative thinking, teachers can help reduce the frenzied collecting of wildflowers and still give students a glimpse of the intricate plant kingdom.

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