

Reflections and Service Story

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It's hard to believe that a year has come and gone. The abrupt change from the school year to the summer allowed for a stark contrast: the abundance of weekly communication suddenly halted as folks left in earnest for trips and/or a much-needed break. Instead of the intense energy that comes with teaching, the service now consisted of the quiet calm that is found in gardens.

Despite the lack of planned meetings, while maintaining the gardens over the summer, I've run into quite a few different people using the garden spaces. At Crestwood Elementary, I don't know if I've gone and not run into volunteers or families taking care of the gardens. There's always someone around weeding, watering, or working in the forest. A few times at Schenk Elementary, I've had summer classes come into the garden while I was weeding. One in particular was looking for unique objects to create art from (odd leaves, interesting textures, etc.). I had the chance to help students collect materials, but also was there to facilitate an impromptu tasting of harvestables in the garden. Nearly every time I go to Leopold Elementary, there is a community member helping in the garden or just stopping to see the space while they're biking along the trail next to the school. It always leads to good conversations with folks who are interested in supporting the space, and allows for the community to feel comfortable in the garden that was made for them (Leopold's garden is the school and community garden since it is a community school). Even at La Follette High School, where the garden is hidden in the newly locked and fenced-in arboretum, I've run into teachers that I worked with over the school year. These chance encounters make every day in the garden a little more exciting, breaking up the monotony that summer can bring.

In the four gardens, I've had a chance to reconnect with the plants that have always been at the heart of my teaching and learning. Several of the gardens have native plant gardens, which are useful for pollinators while also providing new opportunities for students to try fresh-harvested teas. My cooking club sampled several such teas – purple coneflower, bee balm, and white cedar. Each tea had its own, unique flavor. The light, menthol flavor of purple coneflower tea, was quickly overshadowed by the intense flavors of the other two. Bee balm, with its bitter, peppery taste was the second favorite among students and teachers due to its lack of sweetness (despite having been made with the same amount of honey as the other two). However, the clear winner was white cedar tea, with its bright, forest-y taste. One student described it as tasting like “pure happiness” and couldn't stop smiling while drinking it. Being able to identify edible and medicinal plants hits the core of my education, and being able to share some of that with my students really puts everything into perspective: all of the education we get helps our personal growth, of course, but really so much of it is for the next generation. Everything good that we learn is for sharing. Knowledge can grow, just like anything we might plant in the garden, it just needs a bit of nurturing.

