

MEDICINE PLANTS AT BAYFIELD SCHOOL

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As I write my final reflection in my first term of serving as an AmeriCorps Farm to School member at the School District of Bayfield, I look back at all the fun, beautiful, informative and even challenging moments in this role. There is one that stands above the rest in importance and uniqueness: incorporating medicine plants into the curriculum.

One aspect of nutrition and wellbeing that I find is often overlooked in education is plant and fungal medicines. Serving in a district largely composed of Red Cliff Ojibwe tribal members, plant medicine is quintessential to cultural teachings. Integration of this aspect has been very important to the district and being an herbalist myself, I was more than delighted to continue expanding this area.

Every morning that school was in session my co-member or myself would brew two types of teas or infusions for staff, middle school, and high school students to enjoy which were in a centralized location called the “tea station”. In the warmer months one could find iced drinks using medicinal herbs like sumac, lemon balm, and oatstraw and during the cooler times of year warming beverages that aid in immunity were often featured; chaga, elderberry, and rosehip infusions to name a few. Staff and students would often thank us for the preparation and we quickly found out which teas were everyone’s favorites.

This past year, milky oat top infusion was requested again and again. Freshman students would find us in the morning and ask, “Will there be oats today?”. Milky oat tops have a subtle refreshing taste and are loaded with vitamins and minerals that support the nervous system. Personally, I have been drinking this infusion nearly every day for the past seven or so years and have been encouraging friends and family members to brew it for themselves as well. For me, it is a great caffeine alternative that invites a calm alertness and helps ease mild anxiety and it makes me glad that young people have taken to this ritual as well. Earlier this month the garden crew made a new 5x10 bed and planted the whole plot with oats for Fall harvest.

A great educational document that has come out of this project is the development of a tea binder with the “how to” on teas including selecting herbs, blending, brewing, and the ojibwemowin names for these plants. We are even working with Mino Bimaadiziwin Farm in Red Cliff to translate some non-native herbs into the language. For example, marshmallow is described as slippery root or ozhaashaa jiibik.

In the Winter we also taught classes with middle and high school students on medicinal herbs and blended teas together that we later served at the tea station. It was great seeing students who were usually reserved really get inquisitive and creative with their blends and come up unique with names for them.

The medicine plants don’t stop at the tea station, during the last quarter of the academic year I collaborated with a high school art class to design a medicine garden mural. Currently we have purple coneflower, wild rose, and dandelion painted on the side of the building by the bus drop off/pick up. My hope is that more students will add to this mural in subsequent years and every passerby will learn these plants and be able to recognize them as medicine.

All in all, it feels necessary to share medicine plants as a part of a garden and nutrition curriculum. Getting tea to students, staff, and community members and creating a space where they can feel more comfortable trying different plants in this way feels like a great accomplishment. I think it is just the beginning of important lessons on the plants that surround us and how they help nourish and heal our bodies.

