

Confessions of a Volunteer

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"So you are a volunteer at the Arboretum! But what, exactly do you do?"

When my friends ask this question they usually want only a short answer which will confirm their suspicions that I'm merely trying to dodge the committee they think is more important. They must have a strange variety of ideas of what I do, because each time the question is asked, the answer may be different. It would help if they understood the function of the Arboretum itself, and the Youth Section in particular.

Under the direction of Mrs. Gertrude Woods, Education Specialist, the Youth Section at the Arboretum attempts to meet some of the needs of children who, already in love with "nachur," fill the after-school and Saturday classes to look, feel, smell, taste, listen, and ask questions; to pinch and pull, plant and pluck, in their eagerness to satisfy their curiosity. There are special classes during school hours for handicapped children, or gifted ones; there are classes for leaders of youth groups; there are special interest field trips; there are school bus tours, summer workshops, Christmas celebrations and Arbor Day programs!

Now this is a pretty big order to fill. There were 540 children registered as students in classes at the Arboretum alone last year. Extra hands are needed, and volunteers are welcomed. In order to encourage more help and to give an idea of some of the possibilities, I'd like to outline here the variety of really "fun" things I've been privileged to do during the past two years. They run from simple house-keeping chores in office, classrooms, museum, greenhouse, and gardens, through preparation of materials and setting up for classes as well as assisting teachers, to actually taking youngsters on short field trips and teaching classes. Yes, there are other volunteers aside from me, but not enough. Please excuse me for talking only about what *I* have done — it is a way of being specific, to help you see where *you* might help.

At first I took phone calls and handled registration which is done by mail. Then I added cleaning out the mouse cages, whose tenants were increasing in order to satisfy the summer appetites of the snakes. (It only took about fifteen minutes to sift through the bottom of the trash can to find the five tiny naked mice I dumped out by mistake!) Hummingbird feeders had to be kept filled with syrup, and the large bird-feeder covered with seed. One day when Mrs. Woods was away, the ladies from the herb society found a dead but beautiful little barn owl on the grounds. When it was brought in I had to decide what to do with it — which was to wrap it up and put it in the refrigerator with the hummingbird syrup, and my lunch, to wait for someone to take it to the McCurdy Nature Center at Eaton Canyon where there is a taxidermist. (Amateur taxidermists please note: your

services could be used, for other birds are found similarly and could be permanently placed in our own Children's Museum instead of being given away.)

Gradually I was provided with a wider range of activities including:

- (a) Cleaning and rearranging the seed cabinet — a large glass showcase whose shelves are filled with various engaging items made of seeds and pods by children in the "Art in Nature" classes;
- (b) Cutting paper for name tags, Christmas decorations, mounting pictures — a perpetual job — reams of odd sizes of colored paper are needed;
- (c) Mounting pictures, covering them with plastic so they will be durable enough to use over and over in the classes to show fruits and vegetables, flowers, trees, insects, birds, whatever may be appropriate to the topic under discussion;
- (d) Typing and filing student record cards; addressing envelopes and post cards; envelopes; mailing;
- (e) Spray painting plant labels: spray painting milk cartons to be used as planters;
- (f) Gathering acorns; collecting different kinds of eucalyptus caps; collecting seeds;
- (g) Bringing pine cones and bits of wood from the mountains;
- (h) Collecting more than 100 one-gallon glass jars from school cafeterias and helping to use an electric-wire glass-cutter to remove the tops so they can be converted to terrariums;
- (i) Pressing leaves; sorting leaves and organizing the plant presses;
- (j) Using dry pressed tree leaves to make a large tree-shaped sampler-poster to hang on the museum wall;
- (k) Using "Contac" (a clear plastic self-sticking material) to cover leaves on windows;
- (l) Helping to cut boughs of cypress into smaller pieces for the children to use for making wreathes;
- (m) Organizing the accumulation of notes on the water birds of Lasca Lagoon and making a chronological outline which included information on the fish situation — (the carp had become so big and numerous they were eating the ducklings, so a fish-kill was ordered and the lagoons restocked with mosquito fish and red-eared sunfish.)
- (n) Emptying, cleaning and refilling the aquarium (a tank demonstrating "life in a balanced pond community" which really balances pretty well except that after 6 or 8 months the algae on the glass walls becomes so thick we can't see the crayfish, mosquito fish, snails, and water plants inside!)
- (o) Watering the green house; cleaning up in the greenhouse, removing dead foliage from stock plants (sources of much of the material used in classes) and pulling weeds from under the benches.

It was not obvious to me that I was working up to teaching my own classes. I'd already told Mrs. Woods I couldn't do that. No experience . . . too much responsibility . . . I'd help, though. We collected succulent tip cuttings in the African Section and once I set up the materials for her class when she had to be away until time to begin. This meant preparing twelve cuttings of each of six different kinds of succulents, arranging them around the big outdoor work table with planting soil

heaped along the middle, with the flats, planting sticks, labels, etc., handy so the children could get right to work. Since this was preceded by a classroom demonstration of propagation methods and was followed by a field trip, all of which had to fit into an hour and forty-five minutes, they had no time to waste.

Every Wednesday morning Mrs. Cummings brought her EMR class (Educable Mentally Retarded children) from San Gabriel on the bus to take gardening from Mrs. Woods. It was fun for me to help with this group of about fifteen boys and girls. We planted, tended and harvested radishes, lettuce, cabbage, and other vegetables; set out annuals in the flower bed; planted bulbs; experimented with water sprinklers; learned how to prune roses from one of the regular Arboretum gardeners; pricked out seedlings; made divisions of *Sansevieria* for planters; learned lots of useful things.

During the spring semester two teachers brought their combined classes of emotionally handicapped children. I helped this group, too, because they simply needed another pair of hands.

After assisting and observing Mrs. Woods through one six-week session of Indoor Gardens Class for 6 and 7 year olds, I discovered that I *could* do it myself, after all! Six times through I've taught this series of classes in which the children learn, by actually doing it themselves, that there are many different ways to propagate plants. They plant a carton of succulents for a sun garden to take home, and a terrarium for shade plants. They gather and plant seeds which grow during the six weeks into trees to take home. They may have a chance to see the huge nest of the Black Australian swan and the tiny nest of the hummingbird, all in the same trip. Later, if they are lucky, they see the goslings and baby hummers. They may even learn about courtship from the peacocks.

We have "Friends and Enemies Day" when some children find out that the snail is an enemy of the garden even though it won't bite us; that spiders and salamanders are good, and snakes, too! Some children may never have touched a snake before, while others have had them as pets. But there are new experiences for everyone, and surprises for the teacher, too. We top off the last day with a half hour trip through the Arboretum's jungle. Do *you* know what makes a jungle different?

Summer classes begin on June 19th. I'm going to teach "Pot Gardening" to 8 and 9 year olds! Later I may even have a go at "Plot Gardening" with older children!

I'm hooked! Have been ever since the day Mrs. Woods passed out the speckled butter beans she'd soaked overnight, told the children to remove the thin seed coat, separate the cotyledons, and tell what they saw inside. Johnny Grey's clear, precise and surprised voice declared, "Why, there's a tiny little plant in mine!"

Kids deserve the chance to learn all they can about the natural world, and this world desperately needs kids who care enough to learn about it.

Hurrah for the Youth Section of the Arboretum! We'd like you to come, too!



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