

Rooting Readers in the Literary Garden

How a Literary Garden turned a required high school English class into an exciting opportunity for students to dig literature outdoors



Photos: David Johnson

By [Jennifer McQuillan](#)

AFTER SEVENTEEN YEARS of kicking off a new school year in just the right dress with a variety of heels that promised “comfort and flex,” this past September I rolled out of bed, threw on a pair of shorts, a literary-themed t-shirt, and a pair of sneakers. There would be no syllabi or seating charts today. Instead, I would begin my classes in the late summer sunshine of my Literary Garden.

The Literary Garden, composed of plants representing over forty American authors, stands as a testament in the center of the West Bloomfield High School courtyard, that reading is important, that place does matter, that fresh air and sunshine can improve mood and attitudes about learning, and that working in a garden can build a community out of a group of strangers. It is a one-of-a-kind garden where students can touch, photograph, and sketch the same lilac that prompted Nathaniel Hawthorne to write “Buds

and Bird-Voices,” where they can eagerly await the first tulips of spring that represent works by Sylvia Plath and John Green, and where they can break off a sprig of rosemary that Nikki Giovanni herself asked us to plant when one of my students contacted her last spring. The Garden is rooted in a deep love for literature and for nature; the first was possible to transmit to my students in my classroom; the other was stifled by it.

For the last eighteen years, I have taught in a classroom with four white walls and no windows. Throughout those eighteen years, I have watched kids squirm in their rigid, ill-fitting seats, falling asleep, surreptitiously eating, asking for bathroom pass after bathroom pass, anything to get up and get moving. They could not sit still for 90 minutes at a stretch. I, too, have watched the clock militantly like Nurse Ratched, wondering how to keep them engaged and on task.

But how could I teach about the Transcendentalists in that room? How could students possibly understand how Henry David Thoreau observed nature if we were hemmed in on all sides? So even as a brand-new teacher, without any

idea of what I was getting myself into, I took my sophomore American literature classes out into our school's nature preserve and asked them to sketch, draw, photograph, and write about their reactions to their favorite Thoreau quotes. In December.

There was a lot of whining. "It's *cold*, McQ." "There's too much snow on the ground." "Everything is dead in the winter." One year, a student told me she was allergic to cold weather (there is such an allergy). Another time, a student sprained her ankle on an icy trail and we had to fireman's carry her up the hill to get her back to the building (UGG boots are not meant for hiking). Students have climbed trees (that's on my list of things *not* to do) and fallen into the stream, returning to the classroom soaked and chilled. But the scrapbooks they created from this experience were so worth it — personal, vibrant, and intensely connected to the reading. They argued, agreed, fought, challenged, and passionately interacted with Thoreau (and Emerson, and Whitman, and Dickinson, and Hawthorne) in this unit because of two reasons: 1) they could visualize what Thoreau and the other Transcendentalists were talking about — they didn't have to imagine "The Pond in Winter" because they could see it, feel it, and taste the crisp air for themselves, and 2) they could personalize their response in a non-traditional way. Nonconformity ruled the day. I threw out MLA. I threw out proper capitalization. Grammar and spelling had to hold, but they could write in first person, and their textual evidence could come from their own lives. Year after year, class after class, students voted this as their favorite unit.

It was mine, too. I was sick of that classroom. I started thinking bigger. How could the *school* become our classroom? How could the *campus* become our classroom? I applied for a grant to bring in a yoga teacher to tie Transcendentalism to yoga and also for our seniors to manage stress, anxiety, and transitions. Whenever the weather was nice, we held discussions outside in the grass, on the tennis

court, in the bleachers, wherever I could find a novel space to talk. The sunshine and fresh air reinvigorated the kids, and me, too. But I needed more.

Growing an idea

In the fall of 2014, as I was thinking of what I could do for my next West Bloomfield Educational Foundation grant application, I began thinking about the neglected courtyard in the center of our school. It was a mess — all weeds and overgrown grass. I loved gardening and was an avid literary tourist. It struck me that some of the plants I had seen at authors' homesteads may have been around when the authors still lived there. What if we could get seeds or a cutting or some kind of plant from Concord, Massachusetts, where the Transcendentalists lived? Or from Dickinson's Amherst, home? Or even plant some local daisies and throw a green light on them for *The Great Gatsby*? Something, *anything*, that could replicate that brain-based learning I saw my students responding to when we went outside, when all of their senses were engaged in the process. What if I could create a space in our school that was dedicated to the spaces in which authors had lived and worked? Would it inspire my students the way it had inspired the authors? I applied for the grant and received \$500 in seed money (pun intended!).

That winter, I began calling the homesteads to see if any of them would be willing to donate a plant or a seed to our garden. Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House was the first to respond, thinking that perhaps they could provide us with an apple tree from their orchard. Though that didn't work out, I used that contact to begin connecting with other homesteads. Slowly but surely, the list started to build. Walt Whitman. F. Scott Fitzgerald. Mark Twain. Edgar Allan Poe. Ralph Waldo Emerson's Old Manse. Kurt Vonnegut!

If this list looks awfully dead, white, and male to you, you are correct. I quickly came to realize that, as a nation,

How to Grow your Own Academic Garden

It doesn't have to be literary... you could have an art garden, or a scientific garden, or a math garden — think creatively with your cross-curricular friends! The more hands on deck, the better!

The Literary homesteads and museums and houses are facing massive cuts to their programming, and the curators who work there are often historians, but not master gardeners. Please don't contact them. Find local plants.

Try www.gettedfunding.com as a possible resource for STEM-based garden funding, and don't forget to check out local grants as well.

Create a plan and ASK, ASK, ASK for help and donations! I was so surprised by how many people from all walks of life loved helping with the gardening!



we do not preserve the authorial spaces of women or minority writers. We've barely been able to hang on to the houses I have mentioned. Twain's house in Hartford, Connecticut, and Poe's house in Baltimore, nearly shut down due to lack of funding over the last century. And often, women writers — especially women of color — have died in poverty or worse, leaving them all but forgotten. This was especially true when I went hunting for Zora Neale Hurston's home in Florida. I, of course, owe Alice Walker a deep debt of gratitude for all of the work she did to track down Hurston's grave in Fort Pierce, Florida in the 1970s. What is more astonishing is the group of Hurston historians — Adrienne, Brenda, and Hassie — who keep Zora's legacy alive in Fort Pierce at their own expense. These women may not have had a plant to give me, but they gave me a sense of Hurston's place that I could take back to my students as we read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. We planted a local pear tree in Hurston's honor, and this past fall, my sophomores gathered underneath that pear tree to discuss the novel in the sunshine rather than hearing me drone on about policies and procedures as the clock ticked by interminably. That kind of start to the school year changed everything for my students, and for me, generating an excitement and a novelty to my class that convinced teenagers normally glued to their devices to give me — and the authors — a chance.

As for creating the Literary Garden itself — well, that was a rocky start. I went on Facebook asking for donations of dirt. I contacted dozens of big-box stores and local landscapers looking for dirt. I had plants ready to be shipped — but I had nowhere to plant them! I applied for grants like mad, scoring one through the company of a former student, and received incredibly generous donations, big and small, from community members, current and former students, and parents — I was stunned. A local landscaper donated his time to plan out the garden. In the end, it took a group of volunteers and an army of wheelbarrows four days to wheel in — *by hand* — four cubic yards (3 cubic metres) of pea gravel and nineteen cubic yards (14.5 cubic metres) of dirt.

Julia Whitehead, founder and CEO of the Kurt Vonnegut Memorial Library in Indianapolis, loved the idea so much that she offered to be the literary sponsor of the garden. Even more thrilling,



she got us in touch with the Vonnegut family, and we were permitted to dig up the hydrangeas that flank Kurt in the famous picture his daughter Edie took of him in 2006, the year before he died. This spring, two years after they were planted, the hydrangeas flowered next to a replica of the door that my theater tech students created in honor of Vonnegut. Vonnegut's hydrangeas are blue; ours bloomed pink, so this fall we will work with Karen Matynowski, our AP Environmental Science teacher, to determine what soil changes need

to be made — and when, and why, and how — to turn the hydrangeas blue. I've already researched the answer to this question, but there is no point in doing it myself when I can get the kids — and an entirely different discipline — involved and excited about the Garden. And I can ask my kids — why blue? "Why do you think Vonnegut favored blue?" "What clues can you find in his writing?" "Why might that be significant?" And so it goes.

Two years later, the West Bloomfield High School Literary Garden flourishes in the center of our courtyard. Allen Ginsberg's sunflowers crane their necks toward the sky, and Ralph Waldo Emerson's bloody butcher corn is taller than I am. The false indigo pods from the Old Manse are beginning to turn black — perhaps we can auction off the seeds in a fundraiser this fall. Hemingway's mint needs a haircut, and Marge Piercy's daylilies are blooming fiercely under the hot July sun. Eugenia Collier's marigolds sprout sunshiny happiness from the black mulch, and Walt Whitman's lilac needs to be kept well-watered so it does not burn out. This fall I will need to plant Mark Twain's burr oak trees out in the nature preserve so they have room to grow and expand, which they desperately need. The students and I have spent hours upon hours out there, discussing authors and stories, planting, weeding, watering, mulching, conducting fall

and spring clean-ups, reciting poetry, tasting mint, and banging on bongo drums, intersecting the worlds of literature and the environment in ways I could never have anticipated.



Classroom without borders

As Will Coleman notes, "What happens in classrooms now often bears little resemblance to what happens in the 'real world'...

Learning, in most school contexts, has become something that happens from reading texts or being told about things, rather than multi-sensory encounters with the real



world.”¹ This is all too true in English classrooms, where students almost always learn about an author by passively reading or watching a biography of that author. But this May we even looked at the *state* as our classroom, connecting with the Michigan Hemingway Society (MHS) for a one-day field trip to the Horton Bay and Petoskey areas, where Ernest Hemingway lived and wrote the Nick Adams stories for the first twenty-one years of his life. Chris Struble, MHS President, handled the historical connections, I handled the literary passages, and we tag teamed at the sites around the area that were connected to Hemingway’s writing. In “Summer People,” when Nick talks about dipping his hands in the cool spring of Horton Bay where the mint grows wild, there we were, all of us taking turns trailing our hands in the water, nibbling on the mint, the same mint that we have growing in the Literary Garden. But somehow, this experience expanded that sense of place on an even grander scale, because we could count Ernest Hemingway as one of our own, knowing that he fished and camped and swam in the same spaces that so many of us have summered our whole lives. We were no longer tied to my classroom or the courtyard or the campus — we could see beyond those borders. We could feel it in the places and spaces these writers left behind.

It is the summer of 2017, and this week one of my students is speaking with the family of Detroit-born poet Philip Levine, whose poem “They Feed They Lion” tried to capture the rage he witnessed simmering in Detroit during the

riots of 1967 and in Americans against the Vietnam War in 1968. Other students are working to contact the families or museums of Shel Silverstein, Dr. Seuss, James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Ezra Pound, and Elizabeth Bishop. I am working with poet Ross Gay to see if he will provide us with something from his orchard. Next year, the Hemingway trip will include a science component as well, as MHS President Struble pointed out that the conservation of those wetlands is a hot topic in northern Michigan environmental circles.

At the end of the year, I asked my students to reflect on how the Garden had impacted their learning in my class. One of my sophomores wrote: “Being outside is fantastic for learning. Not only does it keep everybody awake and engaged, but it also means we have something to look forward to in the day, and it is far easier to relate a symbol of nature, when you have the nature right in front of you.”

Jennifer McQuillan is a veteran high school English teacher, former journalist, and budding literary gardener who has a lot to learn about garden pests. She teaches at West Bloomfield High School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. She is grateful to Dr. Melissa Talhelm for her research on the Garden and for helping to procure many of the plants that reside there. You can follow the Literary Garden at www.literarygarden.org.

Reference

1. Coleman, Will. “All About... Place-based Learning.” *Nursery World*, 7 October 2010, pp. 17.



The art of land-based early learning, Volume 1: Natural materials and the emergence of ecological relationships

Available: December 2017
Pre-order: \$30 plus shipping
Click here to order online!

Info: sophie@4elementslivingarts.org

4elements
living arts
land • arts • community

Ontario
Trillium
Foundation



Fondation
Trillium
de l'Ontario

An agency of the Government of Ontario
Un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario