

Natural Illinois: Leaves Are All Around



You don't have to go to exotic places to find interesting plants and animals to study at home or in the classroom! From violets and bluestem to oak trees and pines, Illinois plants are as close as your local park or schoolyard. Preschoolers can learn a lot about plants by studying leaves.

Start by taking children outdoors to collect leaves.

- Give each child a bag to fill with leaves. Be sure to ask families if any children have allergies or skin sensitivities to outdoor plants. Even if your neighborhood seems to have only crabgrass and dandelions, children can still learn about leaves on their walks.
- Invite children to look high and low to see leaves on the plants in parks, in gardens, and in the cracks on the sidewalk! Keep in mind that trees may drop leaves all year round, not just in autumn. In spring and summer, carefully trim leaves from grasses, shrubs, and flowering plants. In winter, take leaf or needle cuttings from evergreens such as boxwood, pine, or fir. (Ask permission before collecting on private property.)
- Be sure that you and the children know which leaves can hurt them, such as poison ivy or thistle. If you are not sure whether a leaf is safe to touch, tell children to avoid it. If some children do not enjoy touching leaves, let them use tongs or allow children to work in pairs. Have children wash hands thoroughly after handling leaves or cuttings. Someone may be allergic to one of the plants.

Share resources about leaves.

- Invite a guest speaker to help the children learn more about trees and other leafy plants. Check with your local community college, nature center, Audubon Society, or master naturalist group. A classroom parent may also have expertise and experience.
- Ask a librarian to help you find resources related to leaves: nonfiction picture books, nature magazines, puzzles, or classroom kits.
- Display posters of leaves, trees, and flowers. Add laminated photos of leaves and trees to the science center.

Invite children to study the leaves they collect.

- Ask children what they think about leaves. Make a list of their comments and questions.
- Show children books featuring leaf designs of artists such as Andy Goldsworthy or Lois Ehlert. Encourage children to make their own leaf designs.
- Keep in mind that you can learn about leaves along with the children. Help them look up differences between simple and compound leaves. Introduce words for the parts of leaves, such as *midrib*, *vein*, *blade*, and *margin*.
- Invite children to think of ways to sort their leaves (such as by color, size, or shape).
- Point out that people can look at a plant's leaves to figure out what kind of plant it is. Show children how field guides help identify plants. Help them notice leaf shape, size, and structure.
- Look up easy ways for children to press leaves to preserve them for display.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



Children's Research Center
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
51 Gerty Dr. • Champaign, IL 61820-7469
Telephone: 217-333-1386
Toll-free: 877-275-3227
E-mail: iel@illinois.edu
<https://illinoisearlylearning.org>



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