

DIG ART!

CULTIVATING CREATIVITY
IN THE GARDEN



Photography in the Garden: The Human Camera

Overview This engaging activity offers a chance to observe plants and gardens closely in pairs followed by descriptive and creative writing.

During the course of our lives, we are constantly bombarded with visual information. In fact, so much visual news comes to us that we learn to tune out and “not see” details that would overwhelm us if we were to be continually observing. With this activity, we aim to look closely in an effort to sharpen observation skills —skills that are essential to many disciplines such as science, writing, and the arts.

Students will work in teams, with one as the “photographer,” and the other as the “camera,” and then they will switch roles. After talking about the activity, and what they noticed, they will write short poems, such as haiku, based on what they have observed about the plants they have seen.

Objectives Students will:

- experience the beauty of plants by looking closely
- sharpen observation skills
- write creatively and descriptively
- work in cooperative learning teams

Time 30-60 minutes

Materials

- writing paper and a pencil for each participant
- flowers or other garden plants

Instructions

1. Begin by preparing the group to go outdoors to the garden or schoolyard. Alternatively, you could move to an indoor space where students can explore flowers and other plants up close.
2. Gather together near the garden and discuss initial observations, including what we tune out or don't see. Ask the group what the difference is between looking and careful observation. You might begin with an example, such as the way people in the Northeast eagerly await the return of robins. Those first few robins you see are exciting, and are often pointed out – “It's a robin, it must really be spring!” Within a week or two, robins are everywhere, become a part of the outdoor background, and many people stop noticing them.

**Instructions
(continued)**

Another example is how we tune out familiar information that we simply don't need. You may ask the group to describe details of very familiar settings, such as the school hallway, places in their homes, the after school program, or the community center that they walk through daily. Although they may recall the bigger parts of the scene, they may likely have forgotten details. Subtle patterns on the wall, accumulated dirt or papers in corners, what is written on a chalkboard, and other elements may disappear from our conscious minds.

3. Generate a discussion. What are other examples of ways in which we have a great deal of visual information around us that we miss? Why do we tune it out? In which occupations would keen observation be a critical part of the work?
4. Have students pair up. Ask for two volunteers to demonstrate how one student will be the "photographer" while the other is the "camera." The camera will have his/her eyes closed, while the photographer positions him/her close to a beautiful flowering bulb, for example, at an angle that will offer a unique and perhaps unexpected perspective. Positioning could be from above, from below, up close, or far away. When cued the camera will open his/her eyes for 10 seconds, record a visual memory of what s/he has observed, then close their eyes again. Move the camera to a new location; repeat two more times. Have the camera jot down her/his observations then switch roles.



5. Gather together to discuss the process. What did students notice when they were the camera that they might not have otherwise? Often, young people will describe intricate details of texture, color variation, delicate drops of dew, flower structures, insect visitors, and other details they may never have seen before.
6. From this discussion, generate a list of types of things a good artist or scientist observes: lines, shapes, forms, shadows, shades, tones, perspectives and size in relation to each other, etc.

7. After discussing, students are ready to use their observations to write poetry about the plants they observed. The 5-7-5 syllable structure of a haiku is a good place to begin.

Pale butter petals
Early morning dew still clings
Nodding, soft breezes

You might encourage students to take the same subject and play around with different versions of it. Which of their poems do they prefer and why?

Vivid markings steer
Honey bee heavy laden
With golden pollen

Vivid markings guide
Heavy laden gold miner
Bee exits, stage right

8. Seek student input as to how they want to go further with this flexible activity. It can lead to exploring indoors or outdoors, really anywhere there are plants or a garden.

Taking it Further

Host a nature-based poetry slam on Earth Day, Arbor Day, or any other time that seems appropriate. Feature these and other creative writings or artwork from young people.

Write about the experience, and other outdoor experiences, in a garden or nature journal.

Expand the activity to include opportunities to draw, paint, make collages, or other creative expressions.

Repeat the activity with other outdoor elements as a focus – for example, observe trees during the winter months.

An interesting twist is to explicitly notice, and write about, pollution, garbage, trash, and other waste elements of the environment that we may be tuning out. What are the impacts of ignoring the waste we generate?

Try this activity on a micro-scale. Look through a microscope or hand lens and describe in detail the color, textures, and other elements of the subject.