

MUCK in

It's time to pull on your Wellies and embrace the autumn weather, says national charity Learning through Landscapes...

Whether you're exploring the changing colours of falling leaves or harvesting crops from the nursery garden, autumn is a wonderful season for outdoor learning experiences. You can use your outdoor space to investigate nature and enjoy seasonal celebrations — try the following suggestions to maximise its potential and give your children the best experience of the new season.



But before you go out...

As the warmth of summer fades, remember to prepare for the change in weather by having suitable clothing for autumn. Check that Wellington boots are free from holes, and that you have the right sizes. Wet weather clothing is essential to ensure access to the outdoors at all times throughout the autumn months. If you don't have any, think about using any funding you have access to, or may be able to raise. Consider two-piece rubber sets as they're perfect if the rain stops and temperatures rise as the top halves can be removed. Don't forget to invest in suitable clothing for practitioners too, as they'll need to be prepared to be out in all weathers.

Tip: Consider where your wet weather clothing is stored. Many settings develop a transition area between indoors and outside where children can change.

Harvesting and growing

If you've already been growing, there'll be plenty to harvest — from pumpkins and leeks to potatoes and parsnips. Fruit such as apples and pears will also need to be picked. Use what you've already grown to learn about harvest time. Set up a role-play 'farmer's market' outdoors and encourage observational drawings of harvest fruit and vegetables.

Tip: Fruit trees and bushes can be planted from November to February; onion sets (miniature onion bulbs) are easy to grow, easily maintained and can be planted from September to November; perennial plants and trees should be established in autumn ready for growing in the spring.

Nature trail

Many autumn activities and themes can be explored through nature in your outdoor space. Encourage the children to look carefully at leaves, discovering their different shapes. Can they find out which trees they come from? Do all trees lose their leaves? Identify different autumn colours, and try mixing paints to match them. Gather leaves and use them to make leaf-print paintings. You could provide colour charts (paint ones work well) so children can match the different colours. Use cameras to record the changes in the trees and then display the pictures.

Discover conkers in their prickly shells and compare them with acorns and sycamore seeds. Plant the conkers in pots to illustrate that all trees produce seeds; then investigate the different ways that conkers could be dispersed (by animals and the wind).

Tip: Try creating an autumn sensory box. Fill it with natural materials such as leaves, acorns, apples, pine cones, conkers and nuts. The children will enjoy trying to guess what they're holding.

Weather activities

Explore the wind by taking a parachute canopy outside, or let the children use different sizes of material to catch the wind. Light objects such as ribbon and feathers will demonstrate its power. You can explore the distances that various objects travel. Paper bags can make great kites.

Try installing a weather station to monitor the change in weather. These do not have

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Learning through Landscapes provides an early years outdoors membership package offering advice and support to help unlock the potential of your outdoor environment. Membership provides unlimited access to individual advice and support by phone or email, bimonthly mailings full of inspiration, online access to a comprehensive library of resources and discounts on training, conferences and publications.

to be expensive; a rain monitoring pot can be made with a plastic jug with measurement markings. You can add a windsock (which can be very cheap) to demonstrate the wind's power and direction, and a simple thermometer will display the drop in temperature as autumn grows colder.

Tip: Keep a logbook to allow the children to monitor the changes in temperature and rainfall.

Maintaining your space

Autumn's wet and windy weather necessitates certain maintenance duties. Start by regularly checking that all of your outdoor surfaces are free from algae or moss, so they don't become slippery when wet. If you have large trees in your space, look for any dead wood or branches that may have become loose in the windy weather. Regularly check that drains/gutters are free from falling leaves and that they're in good working order to prevent



flooding. Also, remove leaves from surfaces that children are inclined to walk, run or climb on.

If you have a pond, clear it of debris and take out any plants that may have died to allow life to return to the water. Children will love investigating and identifying the creatures that are discovered.

Getting the children involved with other maintenance jobs will offer them fun learning experiences; they'll take great delight in their new responsibilities. Provide child-friendly tools such as dustpans, brooms, rakes and wheelbarrows to encourage them to participate in the duties of maintaining their space.

Plan to play out

Learning through Landscapes has developed an award-winning step-by-step toolkit, PlayOut, to support and improve the use, design and management of outdoor areas in early years settings. It includes guidance workbooks with detailed advice on project management and planning improvements, a CD with adaptable tools and resources, a DVD to create interest and motivate and inspire staff and parents, 10 case study example cards and a 'vision and values' poster to illustrate the benefits of using the outdoors. For further information visit www.ltl.org.uk



Dates for your diary

Find the fun in autumn festivals...

September 21st: International Peace Day

Learning that the world is larger than our own families, schools and nurseries, and that we are members of a global family, is valuable. Make and fly peace flags outdoors. Invite children to wear national dress and bring in foods from around the world for an outdoor feast.

November 5th: Diwali

The Hindu Festival of Lights symbolises a victory of good over evil through the story of Rama and Sita. Try lighting divas (small

oil lamps) or fireworks to commemorate the story. Rangoli patterns in coloured powders are used to decorate floors and entrances. You may wish to try this idea in different places outdoors using chalk, seeds or powder paint. Or, you may like to recreate the journey and adventures through drama and invite parents along to the event.

November 5th: Guy Fawkes Day

Lighting a fire is a great outdoor activity — burn leaves and old bits of wood (make sure what you burn is safely managed and will not release poisonous fumes). You may like to use fire as a means of exploring science. This offers all sorts of opportunities to talk about the pleasure, properties and dangers of fire, as well as the story of Guy Fawkes.

Tip: To prepare for the colder months, invest in a plastic curtain (like those you see at the supermarket) to ensure that children have continual access to the outdoors whilst minimising heat loss from inside the nursery. They're relatively easy to install and can also help lower your heating bills.