

A winter wonderland

Wrap up warm and head outside to make the most of the wintry weather, says national school grounds charity, Learning through Landscapes...

Before you go out...

Make sure you have the right clothing – wrapping up well is essential to getting the most of the winter season outdoors. Put on several layers instead of one big coat – then if the sun comes out, you can easily peel a layer off. Gilets are a great option as they protect the core of your body without restricting the actions of your arms and hands. Mittens or gloves are also important (consider fingerless gloves or mittens with fold-back tips for increased dexterity), as are hats on those really icy days – practitioners should always consider designs that do not restrict their vision or limit their hearing in any way.

You'll also need to review your Wellington boot supply, checking for holes and general wear and tear.

Tip: Create a well-organised transition area for changing into winter weather clothing that encourages independence.

Add pegs and baskets to allow the children to replace items once used.



Harvesting and growing

One of the best things about having a vegetable patch in your setting is that you can grow all year round, even when temperatures plummet. If your setting already has an allotment then you'll be harvesting wonderful winter vegetables such as brussel sprouts, turnips, swedes, leeks and parsnips. Try combining harvest activities with vegetable-related stories such as *The Gigantic Turnip*, *Jack and the Bean Stalk* or *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

If you want to plant in the cold season, winter onions grow through the harshest UK weather. Garlic cloves can be sown around December/January and actually benefit from a frosty period, as it later promotes a swift growth.

At the end of February try sowing early peas, beetroot, spinach or

carrots. You may wish to protect these with a cloche (a transparent plastic cover to protect young plants from the cold). Check any young trees you've planted and support them with ties and stakes to prevent wind damage.

Tip: Build a compost heap. You can spread or dig compost into your earth any time of year, but winter is perfect as you'll probably have lots of bare soil. Spreading compost at the end of winter also helps keep the weeds down in the next growing season.

Nature trail

Winter is a great time to explore the hibernation of wildlife in your outdoor space. Ask the children to help insects hibernate by creating a mini-beast hotel. This can be as simple as a pile of logs and stones in a corner of your outdoor space. Stacked wooden pallets are also ideal. Place pots, leaves, stones, piping, pieces of wood or bamboo in the gaps to create nooks and crannies. A mini-beast hotel makes a great permanent fixture and can be used all year round. You could also try asking the children to make seed cakes or feeders for the birds that don't migrate, explaining that they may be struggling to find food in the winter months.





Tip: Take a picture of your outdoor space from the same position every season and compare the images, looking at the different ways in which the weather alters its appearance.

dates for your diary

GET FESTIVE AND RING IN THE NEW YEAR...

December: Celebrating Christmas
Try organising an outdoor nativity play, recreating the stable as it might have been? Or, hold a carol service with the children in the grounds or a Christmas market where cakes, craft items or even the harvest vegetables from the allotment could be sold. If you're fortunate enough to have a tree in your setting's outdoor space, children will love decorating it with weather-proof decorations.

January 25th: Burns Night
Celebrate the Scottish poet's birthday with special foods and a reading of his poetry. The food most associated with Burns night is haggis, but if this isn't to your liking, oatcakes, shortbread and other Scottish delicacies will do! Use your outdoors for some energetic Scottish dancing and invite parents along.

February 3rd: Chinese New Year
Tell the story of the 12 animals that took part in a race to establish who was the fastest. The order in which the animals finished determined the order of the years associated with each animal (2011 is the year of the rabbit). This race could be recreated in the grounds with costumes. Or, have a go at creating your own Chinese New Year dragon dance outdoors.

Tip: Allow the children to 'become' animals and insects by providing lots of different materials for them to create dens to hibernate in your outdoor space. Create a list of animals and insects that hibernate in winter and let them choose!

Weather activities
Explore the icy weather by collecting and measuring icicles, and let the children discover the changes to the grass, leaves and water on frosty mornings. January is the rainiest month of the year, so try brightening up your puddles by adding washing up liquid or food colouring, or chalk around them and measure how long it takes for them to disappear, then discuss why this happens. If you're lucky enough to have snowfall, take sheets of black paper outside and catch snowflakes. You could look at them with a magnifying glass or you may wish to take photos of them whilst explaining that every one is different.

Maintaining your space
Monitor closely those areas that have worn in the colder season or that have become boggy – consider sectioning them off, allowing time to repair. Or, if you have a naturally waterlogged area, try turning it into a bog garden – a great alternative to a pond which attracts a lot of damp-loving wildlife, including frogs and toads.
Check drains again for leaves or debris that could cause floods in the rainy months. Scrub any mossy surfaces and make sure children are aware of any slippery spots.

Tip: If you're always gathering leaves to prevent surfaces becoming slippery, why not build a leaf mould cage? Simply drive four stakes into the ground, staple chicken netting around them and add the leaves. After a year the pile will have reduced by at least two-thirds and can be dug into your allotment soil.

find out more
Learning through Landscapes (tl.org.uk) 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.