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FEATURED

# Students learn about nutrition and nature during outdoor class

By Emily Cox The Herald-Times  
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Shane Gibson of Sycamore Land Trust pours tea during a wild edible and outdoor cooking class for the Cedar Christian School first and second grade class at Trinity Reformed Church Friday afternoon. (Bobby Goddin / Herald-Times)

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Outside on Friday afternoon, first and second graders at Cedars Christian School lined up to give pine needles a haircut.

That's how Shane Gibson, Sycamore Land Trust's environmental education director, explained to the students a way to make pine needle tea.

"I'll hold this branch up, you'll come by with the scissors and you'll give the pine tree a haircut and it'll drop into the water and we'll let that steep," Gibson explained as he sat on a tree stump and held up the pine branch he brought from near his home.

In the outdoor classroom space in the woods near the Cedars Christian School on South Endwright Road southwest of Bloomington, Gibson led the students through a lesson on wild edibles and health benefits of things found in nature. The class made pine needle tea and spicebush tea, then ate persimmon cookies and acorn pancakes with 100% pure maple syrup.

Gibson is partnering with the Cedars Christian School, which provides hybrid schooling for preschoolers through seventh-graders, to teach students lessons outdoors this year. Students attend Cedars Christian School on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and are at home on Tuesdays and Thursdays. On days students are at home, they have work assigned from their teachers or can work on what their parents might have planned.

Before students prepared the tea, Gibson asked them to think of things in nature that are safe to eat. They raised their hands and answered — morel mushrooms, honeysuckle, berries.

"Anything we see outside, do you think we should just try it?" he asked. The students answered no immediately. Gibson explained how not everything is safe or clean to eat and displayed some books about wild edible plants in Indiana.

Gibson told the students, who were sitting on tree stumps and logs, what steeping is and how it extracts nutrients while making tea. Spicebush tea has been used to help people with coughs, colds or parasites, he said.

"It's a healthy tea and they use it for a spring tonic, they say," Gibson said. "Sometimes like pioneers, after a long cold winter, they would make spicebush tea and it would lift their spirits up after being maybe stuck in the cabin all winter long."

Pine needles are very nutritious, he told them, and said the bark from the inside of a white pine tree is edible in case of an emergency.

"Pine needles have five times more vitamin C than a lemon," Gibson said. "And lemons are one of the healthiest fruits. Lots of vitamin A, so it's good for blood pressure and contains antioxidants. Those are things that help your body stay healthy and fight off sickness."

Students snipped pine needles and spice bush into pots of water, then as the tea steeped, Gibson sent them in search of sassafras. Then they discussed and utilized fire building skills. Gibson taught them terms like tinder and kindling and what to use when getting a fire started.

Once the tea was ready, Gibson strained it into mugs for the students.

"This is really good," a student said while sipping on the pine needle tea. Others raised their eyebrows, impressed by the taste.

They also got the chance to try sorrel. Gibson said his mother-in-law is Jamaican and the drink is traditionally made in Jamaica around the holidays. That wasn't as big of a hit among the students, possibly because of the spice of the added ginger.

Then it was time for persimmon cookies, made from persimmon pulp, butter, flour, cinnamon, nutmeg and other spices. The cookies received rave reviews, with a student exclaiming, "That's amazing" after the first bite.

Prior to Friday, one of Gibson's most recent lessons with the group of students focused on predicting weather by opening persimmon seeds from nearby Greene County.

During that visit, students learned about folklore, or stories that are often passed by word of mouth, and like with the game telephone, could change as they were passed from person to person.

After eating persimmon cookies, the students dipped acorn pancakes, made from acorn flour and cornmeal, in Gibson's homemade syrup, being sure to not double dip. A student was shocked to hear that the syrup had no added sugar, just nature's sugar, as Gibson put it. Gibson said he will likely tap trees and make syrup with the students early next year.

Gibson said acorns, which come from oak trees, are one of the most important foods for all wildlife, such as deer, turkeys and squirrels.

"Also, the acorn was probably the No. 1 food for the people that first lived here, the Native Americans that lived right here on this land," he said.

When it comes to what Gibson does as Sycamore Land Trust's environmental education director, he said people tend to think the lessons are just science focused. But talking about folklore ties in literature. Other times there's writing or other subjects involved.

"Of course, there's science when it comes to the plants, but it's also about being healthy," Gibson said. "There's a lot of talk about just being outdoors is good for the body, the mind, the spirit. I think the health aspect is a big part of that, just being outside, moving, but then what are the nutritious things around us? I think it's kind of important to know."

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