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For Forest Kindergartners, Class Is Back to Nature, Rain or Shine

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Carrying a plank in a flooded part of the woods behind their schoolhouse, pupils age 3½ to 6 at the Waldorf School of Saratoga Springs, N.Y., spend three hours each day outdoors.

All photos by Nathaniel Brooks for The New York Times

SARATOGA SPRINGS, N.Y. — Fat, cold droplets splashed from the sky as the students struggled into their uniforms: rain pants, boots, mittens and hats. Once buttoned and bundled, they scattered toward favorite spaces: a crab apple tree made for climbing, a cluster of bushes forming a secret nook under a willow tree, a sandbox growing muddier by the minute.

They planted garlic bulbs, discovered a worm. The rain continued to fall. It was 8:30 a.m. on a recent Wednesday, and the Waldorf School's "forest kindergarten" was officially in session.

Schools around the country have been planting gardens and planning ever more elaborate field trips in hopes of reconnecting children with nature. The forest kindergarten at the Waldorf School of Saratoga Springs is one of a handful in the United States that are taking that concept to another level: its 23 pupils, ages 3 ½ to 6, spend three hours each day outside regardless of the weather. This in a place where winter is marked by snowdrifts and temperatures that regularly dip below freezing.



A pupil at The Waldorf School of Saratoga Springs, N.Y., collects wood to build a tepee during morning activities in the woods behind the schoolhouse. The school's forest kindergarten opened in September.



Teachers help pupils saw logs to use in getting across bogs.



A log balanced on a split tree trunk makes a great seesaw.



Lunchtime at the Waldorf School. It is one of the schools based on the teachings of the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, and emphasizes the arts and the natural world, with no formal academic curriculum until first grade.

The new forest kindergarten, which opened here in September, is an extreme version of the outdoor learning taught at more than 100 Waldorf schools, all but a handful of them private, scattered throughout the United States. They are based on the teachings of the Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner and emphasize the arts and the natural world, with no formal academic curriculum until first grade.

“I loved the idea of her being outside every day,” said Kim Lytle, whose 3-year-old, aptly named Forest, is the youngest in the class. “If you have the proper gear, I think it’s a really healthy thing to experience the elements and brave the world — and not just on a sunny day.”

The children’s “classroom” is 325 acres of state parkland known as the Hemlock Trail, and a long-empty farmhouse, which the state has licensed Waldorf to use for the year. The school also has regular indoor classes at its main building.

On this day in the fledgling program, whose tuition is about \$7,000, the rain did not taper off, yet the kindergartners remained outside until lunch. Circle time — songs and dancing — took place in the center of a field, behind a farmhouse, followed by a snack of apples and pineapple chunks at picnic tables. The children cut bittersweet vine to make wreaths, splashed in puddles, and, in the sandbox, did some imaginary cooking.

“We’re making something that’s cheesy,” said one girl.

“It’s cookies,” said a boy.

Max Perez, nearly 5, carried a bucket to the swampy edges of the field and scooped up some water. He and the others mixed the sand into gobs of glorious mud. After an hour, Max paused, peering out from his wet hat, and asked, “Is it raining today?”

In some ways, the program is not unlike other kindergartens. Signs declaring a peanut-free zone are taped throughout the farmhouse. There are bruised feelings and scuffles and potty jokes. But the biggest challenge is one not found in traditional classrooms: ticks, lots of them.

Though virtually unknown in the United States, forest kindergartens are increasingly common in Scandinavia and other European countries like Germany and Austria.

Sigrid D’Aleo and Carly Lynn, two Waldorf teachers, proposed adding one in Saratoga Springs because, over the years, they had seen students at their best when outdoors.

“Their large motor skills developed, they worked out their social issues in a better way, they had more imaginative play,” Ms. D’Aleo said. “Children’s senses are so overtaxed in these modern times, so here, it is very healthy for them.”

Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, a book arguing that children have suffered from diminished time outside, said he had heard similar things from educators around the country.

“It helps us use all our senses at the same time,” he said. “It seems to be the optimum state of learning, when everything is coming at us in lots of different ways.”

Alane Chinian, regional director of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, said of the Waldorf school’s use of the Hemlock Trail: “We are delighted to have them there. It expands our mission and furthers the park’s goals of providing nature education to children.”

Here in Saratoga Springs, the children crossed into the forest at midmorning, greeted by the rich smell of earth and leaves. A fallen branch had created an arch to climb through as if they were entering a hidden place straight out of a storybook.

Trails had been worn through the thickets. An old stone wall ran through the center of the trees toward huge tepees the children had built from sticks and vines.

Everywhere, there were things to discover. A branch balanced on a split tree trunk became a seesaw. A teacher sawed thick stumps into logs the children used to bridge bogs. A pit became a monster house, complete with boys standing in the rain shouting warnings: “You don’t want to come over here! You’ll get smushed!”

Piper Whalen, 5, turned toward her own treasure: an enormous fallen tree. She climbed on and lifted her arms. “I’m riding a roller coaster,” she said. “Come on and ride with me.”

The raindrops continued to fall until, finally, it poured, hard enough to splash through the canopy of trees. The children were delighted.

“It’s wet!” exclaimed one.

“My hair is getting a drink of water!” another said.

Piper began to laugh. She stuck out her tongue and turned her face toward the sky.