

Bringing the Curriculum to Life with Trees

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Trees are Important for Schools; if Done Correctly. They can also bring the Curriculum to Life!

Trees are recognised as being important to counter climate change, in the drive to Net Zero, and, in schools, for education. There is often a desire to plant trees within school grounds, both for the environment and for pupil engagement. Done properly, the results can provide a legacy. However, without care, the end result can disappoint.

Not every tree suits the environment of a modern school, and, without appropriate post-planting care and maintenance, many trees will struggle to become established. The drought and heatwaves of 2025 have affected millions of trees. The frustration is that, with care, and the selection of the Right Tree for the Right Situation, success can be achieved.

Some species of trees, such as silver birch, field maple, rowan and London plane, suit urban environments. Others, such as willow, poplar and oak, can present challenges. The education social enterprise Oscar's Tree Academy CIC provides resources to enable teachers to deliver more informed activities. This is funded by business sponsorship. One company, named after the willow tree, was keen to

pay for a willow tree to be planted in each school it worked with. However, willows often form invasive roots which can damage drains and hard surfaces such as car parks, and many schools lack the space for larger trees. That company was happy to explore alternatives.

Some trees, such as rowan and cherry (known for its blossom) have lower branches making them less suited to settings such as car parks and footpaths. Careful siting of such trees is important for their longevity. Larger trees such as beech and alder need space, and are ideal within playing fields. Planting them in parts of a school where space is limited can lead to problems as the tree outgrows its setting.

When trees arrive at a school for planting, for example during National Tree Week, often those who are on site to plant them have limited understanding of what needs to be done. Examples of teachers receiving a bundle of trees and planting them in a single space, or a forest school teacher leading a group of SEND pupils and finding a bundle of trees donated for the school was actually hedging plants.



Pupil planting tree outdoors

Teachers, especially at primary schools, are often specialists in teaching a general curriculum. Trees and the natural environment can provide material for a range of activities covering science, geography, English, history, art and biology. Without appreciating the tree resource that may be present within the grounds of

a school, this opportunity can be lost. Oscar's Tree Academy can guide on this.

There is an increased focus on the role of trees in delivering Net Zero. However, they can provide much more. Time spent walking among trees can help with the mental health of pupils. It can calm the mind, reduce stress, improve learning engagement and enable students and their teachers to engage with nature.

The curriculum requires students to be familiar with the seasons. This can include spring bud-break, the differences between deciduous and evergreen trees, and how trees reproduce. Having access to a range of species can help with this. It can also enable teachers to be informed in an area of curriculum within which they may have limited knowledge.

Geography includes climate and weather. The impact of the weather in 2025, especially on trees and the landscape, can provide a real time insight into the effect of this feature on our daily lives. Working with children to water and weed trees, and watching them grow over the years can provide a memorable learning experience.

Trees generally take about five years to become fully established. If a pupil plants a tree in the earlier years of their primary school education, they can follow the journey of 'their' tree and be more informed about trees and nature.

Trees contribute much more than absorbing carbon dioxide. They can be a significant education resource, if the Right Tree is planted in the Right Place. Combined with informed education resources to equip teachers, the learning experience can be enhanced. An appreciation of the natural world equips children beyond the curriculum, including managing mental health. It also helps to leave a legacy for the next generation.