

## Kids in the Arboretum: The Best Day Ever!

On a sunny June morning, a long line of second grade students winds its way from the Arboretum parking area to the Far Barn. There are smiles, giggles, and excited chatter as the students walk through Holly Park. PHA Youth Education Coordinator Betsy Dripps leads the way. As she reaches the steps, a boy next to her exclaims, “Wow! This place brings back memories!” This stops Betsy short. She laughs. She realizes this second grader has already had previous PHA visits—kindergarten and first grade. So yes, there are memories.

The PHA school education program introduces Island children to the special place that is the Polly Hill Arboretum. In 2012 over 700 students from all six Island schools participated. Betsy has crafted specific programs that adhere to the Massachusetts curriculum framework for science.

“It’s a perfect match. The Arboretum is a laboratory of discovery,” she says.

Polly Hill is quoted as saying, “Educate yourself. Learn. The learning is the fun.” The PHA school education program puts this wisdom into practice. It’s lots of fun, and the school children learn a lot.

Very popular with Island teachers, our free school programs pack the calendar both spring and fall. The most popular programs are “Flowers Change” in the spring and “Seeds Travel” in the fall. Other programs include “Tree Detectives” and “Dinosaur Plants” and there are more. All of the programs fit into the Massachusetts curriculum framework for science. Chip Story, Edgartown School second grade teacher, elaborates, “The Polly Hill program is great because it allows us to fill in the gaps of our curriculum and use it as

an outside classroom. It’s an amazing Island resource. I’ve been going there for 10 years, and I always learn something new each visit.”

The present focus of the Arboretum’s school programs is kindergarten through fourth grade. Every class receives a two-part curriculum. The first is a classroom visit where Betsy and her assistant, Jill Bouck (a certified K-6 teacher), visit the classroom. The second part, shortly after the classroom visit, is the fieldtrip to a living laboratory: the Polly Hill Arboretum.

During the classroom visit, the students are introduced to Polly Hill and how she created her arboretum by planting seeds. They learn that they, too, can be scientists—just like Polly. Betsy and Jill bring armloads of various materials into the classroom: seedpods, leaves, flowers, and scientific tools. These resources provide the opportunity for hands-on learning as each student examines botanical materials with a hand lens or magnifying glass. This activity reaches students of all learning abilities and whets their appetite for their Arboretum fieldtrip.

Once at PHA, children see the entire picture come together. Classes are divided into small groups led by dedicated volunteers, many who are retired teachers. The students are encouraged to be curious, to look around, observe what’s going on, ask questions, and make discoveries. Before they leave they make a drawing and discuss what they’ve seen and learned and enjoyed. Students experience landscape and buildings, plants and animals, sounds and smells that all combine to create an unforgettable experience.

The Polly Hill Arboretum is a perfect place for discovery-based learning. As the Arboretum looks to the future, we’ll explore opportunities for older students as well as collaborative programs with other Island educational institutions. We know that Polly Hill would be glad that Vineyard students continue to visit her arboretum, learn about nature, and create special memories. They have found something very special in their own backyard. As one Island kindergartener exclaimed this fall, “This was the best day ever!”



School group makes their way to the Far Barn.