We want to welcome everyone back to school for another great and exciting school year. During the month of August, now that you’ve survived the first day of school, your thoughts are probably on getting your outdoor classroom ready for another school year. The following is a maintenance/ideas checklist to help you get your outdoor classroom ready for the great fall weather that is not too far away.

- **Hummingbirds:** If you have not already put up at least one hummingbird feeder in your outdoor classroom, then you will want to do it in August so that you and your students can enjoy their aerial show. (I have already noticed a big increase in hummer activity around my home feeders during the last couple of weeks.) In addition, as the northern hummingbirds migrate south during August and September, you are likely to have a lot of other visitors at your feeders. This will also provide you and your students with a great opportunity to be Citizen Scientists by signing-up and participating in an Internet-based project called Journey North. During the fall and again in the spring, the Journey North Program enables the tracking of the hummingbirds’ migration. Once signed-up, your students can report and share hummingbird sighting with other participants in the project as well as view reported sighting from all over North America. To check out this program, go to [http://www.learner.org/jnorth/humm/index.html](http://www.learner.org/jnorth/humm/index.html).

This website also contains a lot of information about hummingbirds as well as information about their other Citizen Science Projects.

If you do decide to put up a hummingbird feeder, don’t waste your money on purchasing the ready-made hummingbird feed. Instead, just mix your own nectar solution by following this simple recipe:

- Summer mixture: 4 parts water (tap water is okay), 1 part white sugar (Example 4 cups water to 1 cup white sugar)
- Fall/Migration Mixture: 3 parts water, 1 part white sugar (Helps them to add weight for their long migration flight.)
- Slowly heat mixture on a stove for 1-2 minutes to help the sugar dissolve. *(It is not necessary to boil the solution to kill bacteria because as soon as a bird feeds for the first time, the mixture will be contaminated anyway.)*
- Allow the solution to cool before filling feeders.
- Unused nectar can be stored in the refrigerator for up to one week.
- Clean feeders at least once a week with hot water and dish soap and every time you refill the feeder.

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System has a publication titled, *Hummingbirds in Alabama* (ANR-0716) that you may view at: [http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-0716/ANR-0716.pdf](http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-0716/ANR-0716.pdf)

- **Fall Vegetable Garden:** Fall in my opinion and based on my experience is the absolute best time of year to plant a school vegetable garden that will provide your students with the opportunity to get the full gardening experience. If you have not already done so, you will want to have the students remove the weeds and plants from the summer garden and get it ready for the fall planting. (Of course, if you have planted pumpkins, peanuts or sweet potatoes, you will want to leave them in the garden until later in the fall.) August is when you want to make your first
planting of cabbage, collards, broccoli, cauliflower, and Brussels sprouts plants. You can also plant seeds for turnips, spinach, carrots and other cool weather crops. For a list of what to plant in August and throughout the rest of the year, go to http://www.aces.edu/pubs/docs/A/ANR-0047/ANR-0047.pdf and print off a copy of the Alabama Gardener’s Calendar.

Dividing Bulbs: If you have been wondering when is the right time to dig and divide some of your bulbs, early fall is a great time to do so. If your daffodils have become crowded, you can dig them late this month or in September and reset them. That way they will still bloom next spring if they have not been too crowded during the past year. This is also the time to divide your iris or add new iris plants. Just remember that when you replant them, do not cover the top of the bulb with more than 1 to 2 inches of soil. Make sure you select a sunny, well-drained area for the plants.

Rooting Oakleaf Hydrangeas through Layering: If you want to try and start some new oakleaf hydrangeas from your current shrubs, layering is your best bet this time of year. Layering is when you dig a trench and then take a branch close to the ground and bend it so that the end of the branch protrudes above the soil surface. Remove the leaves that will end up underground in the trench, scrape the bark off the under-side of the branch in the area of the removed leaves, dust with rooting hormone (available at a garden center) and then cover branch that is in the trench with moist soil. Place a brick or brick-size rock onto of the soil to help hold the branch in the soil. Keep it watered throughout the winter. In early spring, check to see if the branch has rooted. If it has, cut the branch between where it is buried and the mother plant. Leave the branch in the soil for a couple of more weeks before you dig it and plant it in its new home. Check out http://www.hydrangeashydrangeas.com/propagation.html for layering instructions.

Butterflies: Fall is a great time to observe butterflies in their different stages. If you haven’t already done so, check your parsley, fennel or other related plants to see if the black swallowtail butterflies have laid their eggs on them (or if there are caterpillars). This is also a good time to look for gulf fritillary butterflies and their young around your passion vines. Check out the butterfly activities on the AWF website at: http://www.alabamawildlife.org/themed-outdoor-classroom-activities/ for some great ideas.

Spiders: Fall is the time of year when you will start seeing a lot of spiders spinning webs around the outdoor classroom. Use this as a time to teach the students about the important role that spiders play in the environment. This is also a great time to bring a garden spider into the classroom for a long visit. Check out the Itsy Bitsy Spider activity on the AWF website at: http://www.alabamawildlife.org/themed-outdoor-classroom-activities/ and learn how to bring a spider to class.

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