

The Land Laboratory Story

By Cath A. Conlon

The simple question was "Can we do something in association with Montessori education on this piece of land?" The piece of land in question is a 23-acre tract. The land was filled with many natural gifts: pond, woods, various ecosystems, wildlife, wide variety of trees and plants, and great neighbors—but none of what humans feel is necessary to exist (i.e., electricity and running water). That question was asked by one teacher from one school, 5 years ago. Land was cleared and cover crops planted, soil tests were taken, gardens were put in, swales were dug, and a water harvesting system designed and implemented. And the land has dictated the shaping of this functioning system or experience, all with the help of middle-school students.

Has this idea, this dream, grown? Yes! By leaps and bounds—and it has changed, too. I find it a challenge to harness all thoughts, it is so multifaceted. In the birthing phase, the time and space were gifted. Then it was demanding too much time. The thoughts were, "If the land is going to support the education of the school, the school needs also to support the land"; an interdependency was created.

And a second school joined us. Having the participation of a second school started as a way of broadening the students' social environment. Then it dawned on me how limited the land lab would always be if only one school were involved. It would never be all it could be.

"The farm" is the Montessori model for adolescent education. But it was not in any of the schools, nor was there another place where



the schools go. So the next question was: Why can the schools not collaborate with each other to create a space that is shared? After all, community is a vital part of our existence.

While opportunities for learning in this environment are vast, let's consider what we can learn about communities. Healthy communities begin with healthy individuals. We see people everywhere concerned with balancing individual rights and group rights, while serving community needs. We also see people seeking more effective ways for problem-solving.

Today we are members of many kinds of communities simultaneously. There are more of us on earth than ever before, with more mobility. When you combine these two, the result is that many people are living and working next to one another without a history of solving problems together. This is all an inte-

gral part of the Land laboratory. We interface with all of these components, while working together in the gardens preparing meals, building a greenhouse, setting out testing sites for seeds, and many other spontaneous acts of sharing, caring, and nurturing. This experience can transform a young person.

While we're focused on community, maybe we don't stop with the schools. Maybe there is a select group of people who share a similar philosophy, such as the Museum of Natural Sciences, the Children's Museum, or corporations that are aligning themselves with environmental groups, have a strong educational slant, and are concerned with the type of adult our civilization needs. This is not meant for one person to do; it's for the community at large. This is a laboratory for sustainability on all levels, a place for all people to talk.

If we were to step back and look at the population today, you would see that those folks born in the 50s are seeing the population quadruple. This is the first generation to see this. What about our food sources? We are going to have to do a very efficient job of collecting and nurturing seeds. But is that enough? No; we also have to put thought and major research into the soil conditions. Trace minerals found in foods are directly dictated by the soil they are grown in. We have to replenish the soils so that what is growing has nutritional value. So with that in mind, we have stepped from collecting seeds in a very efficient, methodical, mechanized way to growing soil with the same purpose. The next step is to grow people that grow soil that grow seeds that understand how all of these facets fit together and how they function today. This is not only about our children, it's about people creating a foundation for going forward.

How do we make this happen? I think the land laboratory is going to be forevermore changing. It will develop as we go, like a living organism.

As we all continue to learn the complex interdependencies that already exist and can and will support the growth of this idea, we have to figure out how all the pieces best fit together to function. If this is a teaching/learning environment, why can a business not be a part of it? Some small business that is there to support this program. It seems that unless there is a benevolent benefactor, we have to be self-sustaining. This is not about going backward in time, but forward, using computers for our research and storing our data. We want to glean from the past what makes sense today and take that information and proceed into the future with it. This is not about dinosaur days, it's for now, it's for tomorrow 2006-2016.

This is a time for us to be imaginative and creative and to work together. My hope is that the pioneering work of the land laboratory will set a new standard for what our schools can have and offer our most-prized interest: our children. The philosophy of the land lab and its approach to education is as relevant to our children as it is to us. The greatest contribution has been to demonstrate the very real, produc-



Land lab helps the students learn to provide for their own basic needs in a rustic setting.