

Too Much Country Out of the People

WITH A KINDERGARTENER, a third-grader and a fifth-grader back in school, we can expect to re-arrange the potted houseplants most any day now to make room for a milk carton or three of bean plants.

The youngsters are fascinated by the phenomenon that occurs when they place what appears to be a dry "dead" seed in the ground, water it, then in a few days see a living plant spring forth. Teachers wisely use this kind of action-science instruction over and over.

Yet something is amiss; otherwise we would not have concern for the conditions of our environment. Either the lesson stops too soon or else the whole story about the importance of a living plant isn't being told.

The source of environmental pollution may stem in large measure from second rate emphasis of the living world in the urban classroom wedged into cites of steel, glass and concrete.

Pumpkin plants, six inches tall and starving, came to our house last spring. We continued the lesson by transplanting them in the garden. Our third-grader watched them grow all summer. This halloween, she had eight big pumpkins and the option of pie or jack-o-lanterns.

While most of the pupils didn't raise the pumpkin, the cucumber, the bean, the tomato, and so on to harvest, they most likely got the idea that some plants, and not supermarkets, produce our food. Our youngster got more of the story, but still not all of it.

The story that isn't getting told is that all plants make a contribution to human life more precious than that of species cultivated for food—namely, the utilization of carbon dioxide and the production of oxygen.

We cannot live without plants. Does not this fact warrant teaching plant science as fundamentally and as intensive as any subject in school?

Most urban youngsters grow up far from the realm of cultivating plants for food production. But shouldn't they be taught more appreciation for the plants they do come in contact with?

Why don't the youngsters ever bring home a

carton of grass? Or a tree seedling?

Environmental sermonizing has called attention to some fascinating stories that can be told about both.

"It is estimated that one average-size home lawn with healthy, vigorous turf can replenish the air with enough oxygen for eight persons," says turf specialist A. J. Powell from the University of Maryland.

Imagine the reaction of youngsters upon being told that some of the oxygen they breathe is being made right in their own front yard!

They all know by kindergarten that on a hot day the coolest place is in the shade of a big tree and that the sidewalk can give them a hotfoot while the grass is cool. But have they been told the whole story of why living plants can lower surface temperatures as much as 20 degrees?

As the youngsters progress through the grades, they could be told how trees and grass, in addition to producing oxygen, muffle noise, filter the air of dust, purify the air, even reduce the glare of direct and reflected light. And they could be told that plants, like humans, need good water and air to stay healthy.

Telling is not enough. The real learning is in caring for a living thing.

From the youngster who has planted grass and tree, cared for them, watched them grow, and heard the whole story . . . could we expect him to be as messy an environmental housekeeper as we are?

Putting more trees and grass in our parks, around our homes and businesses, along our highways, and in our downtown business sections is an encouraging trend. Perhaps the most critical need is to put more trees and grass into our classrooms.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that our industrialized, urbanized society has committed two grievous errors, summed up by paraphrasing a thought that deserves better company than the product it keeps:

We have taken too many people out of the country and too much country out of the people.

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