

Go on a Backyard Botany Hunt

Want to give your child a lesson in the wide world of plants? You don't have to go camping! You've got an amazing array of wonderful plants right in your backyard or local park. To get your child started, here's a fun activity that will have him researching, collecting, and charting plant specimens from the neighborhood. Just be prepared for a little dirt under his fingernails!



What You Need:

- Large sheet of poster board
- Marker or pen
- Ruler
- Tape or push pins
- 10 sandwich bags
- Field guide or Internet access
- Digital camera (optional)

What You Do:

1. Step 1 Before your child can embark on his botany hunt, he'll need to do a little research into the types of plants that are growing all around him. There are many ways to get the goods, but getting an illustrated field guide for your area from the library or bookstore is probably the best. Short of that, Internet research into the plants in your area should yield useful information and images.
2. Step 2 Get out in the garden! If you don't have access to a backyard, take a trip to a nearby park or nature area – anywhere plants can be found. Have your field guide with you to research and identify the plants that you see, and take photographs of the plants in their natural habitat.
3. Step 3 Collect 10 specimens of different plants, and place each one in a separate plastic bag. If you have many trees around, take a leaf from each. If not, mix it up with weeds, flowers, and leaves from bushes and shrubs. Make sure to only take one leaf or flower, and to be gentle. Ask permission first if you want to collect specimens from a neighbor's garden or other private property.
4. Step 4 Take your botanical specimens back to home base! To begin classifying your finds, use your poster board to make a chart. With a marker and rule, draw a chart with 5 boxes across, and 11 down. Label the rows along the top "Specimen," "Name," "Description," "Habitat," and "Notes." In each of the 10 boxes in the left hand column, tape or pin one of the bags containing a specimen you've collected. The chart should look like this:

Specimen	Name	Description	Habitat	Notes
Plant 1				
Plant 2				
Plant 3				
Plant 4				
Plant 5				

Plant 6				
Plant 7				
Plant 8				
Plant 9				
Plant 10				

5. Step 5 Fill in the blanks! Find out the name of each of your ten plant specimens, using your field guide or Internet research. Then describe each plant using descriptive language. Don't forget to mention height, leaf shape, color, and any other physical qualities you can see. For the "Habitat" column, find out what sort of soil and sun exposure your plant likes. Does it need a wet, cool environment, or a dry, hot one? If you have a photograph of the plant in its natural habitat, tape or pin it in this box. Under "Notes," write down anything else you'd like to include about your plant.
6. Step 6 Display your chart in a prominent position. You've just become a botanist!