

Project Learning Tree – Back in Nebraska!

By: Pam Bergstrom, Lower Elkhorn NRD Forester

In January of 2019 I was asked to be a member of the Nebraska Project Learning Tree Steering Committee. The purpose of this Steering Committee is to get Project Learning Tree back up and running in Nebraska and promote this amazing program to educators who teach Early Childhood Development all the way up into High School. I am a huge proponent for Project Learning Tree and I agreed to be on the Steering Committee and to help get this program back on its feet here in Nebraska.

So, what is Project Learning Tree? Well, Project Learning Tree is a program designed to teach students from Early Childhood all the way up to High School about the importance of our natural resources, specifically trees, forests, urban landscaping/community forests, and windbreaks/shelterbelts/agroforestry. Here in Nebraska, Project Learning Tree or PLT, has been on hiatus for some years, but it is now coming back and gaining momentum in Nebraska with trainings taking part across the state to teach educators and natural resources professionals how to utilize PLT curriculum and how to merge it with classroom requirements.

I have been teaching students about PLT for over 12 years since my days up in South Dakota before I became the forester for the Lower Elkhorn NRD some 9 years ago. I also had some training at college and up in South Dakota to become a facilitator for the program, but now I primarily go into classrooms when requested to talk about trees, forests, and everything in-between. In the fall of 2018 I visited 6 Pre-Schools in Norfolk and utilized the PLT Curriculum to engage these young, future landowners of tomorrow in getting to know trees and understanding their importance in our community and out in the country.

PLT isn't new, it has been around since 1976 and has reached over 135 million students since it first started. You can find PLT in every state and even in other countries such as Japan, Canada, and Brazil. It is run as a non-profit organization through the Sustainable Forest Initiative INC that is dedicated to promoting sustainable forest management across the world. In Nebraska, the Nebraska Forest Service oversees the Nebraska PLT and to find out more about PLT and PLT in Nebraska along with other outdoor programs go to <https://nfs.unl.edu/education> and sign up for their free monthly e-newsletter.

The last week of March 2019 we had the first meeting of the Nebraska PLT Steering Committee and we talked about getting the word out to more people, especially educators and parents, about the program and to schools and education centers interested in PLT once again. If you know of a school or an educator who would be interested in having someone come to their school to teach students with PLT or an educator who would like to become a PLT teacher, send me an email at pbergstrom@lenrd.

Project Learning Tree is a great tool to get kids off their electronic devices and out into the great outdoors and teach them to appreciate the beauty of nature. Because it has been proven that when students are outside, they retain information better.



Here I am taking a core sample out of a Cottonwood Tree during a Walk in the Woods Event in West Point, Nebraska. Walk in the Woods isn't technically a part of Project Learning Tree, but I have intertwined both into my presentations. I should point out that taking a core sample from a tree does not harm the tree.



Steve Karloff the Southeast Nebraska District Forester with the Nebraska Forest Service plays a game with the students of West Point, Nebraska to learn about how trees grow and how important trees are to the environment.



Steve Rasmussen the Northeast Nebraska District Forester with the Nebraska Forest Service shows students about the safety that goes into running a sawmill in West Point, Nebraska.



In this activity that combines Project Learning Tree and Walk in the Woods, each student is given a 'tree cookie' that is used to tell how old the tree was when it died or was cut down. Students learn that a tree will put on 2 rings each year, a light wood ring that is called the spring ring, early ring or wood and a dark wood ring that is called the late ring or the summer ring.