

# Let the library be your bridge back to nature

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## FULL TEXT

Libraries are living, growing things. Just as society evolves to adapt to changing needs so do libraries.

Technology is one case in point. As society has become more dependent upon technology, library services and resources also adapted. Not only do we provide computers but our programming also evolved to include instruction in their use.

But so often progress in one area can lead to a decline in another. The benefits technology provides, and our dependence upon it, comes at a price. As a child I remember my mother fighting to get us to come inside. Now parents often lament they have to fight to get their kids to go outside.

This growing distance from the world of nature has been called "nature deficit disorder". It's a malaise that affects people of all ages but especially our youth. Studies show children spend an average seven hours a day in front of screens and monitors.

Libraries are not unaware of this concern. Accordingly, our identity has been undergoing yet another change. Libraries are evolving from buildings into bridges. Our programming increasingly includes outdoor activities. But even in their design and conception, libraries are revealing themselves as bridges back to nature.

But then libraries have always been bridges disguised as buildings. For while reading often veils itself as sedentary and silent, it has always taken us "outside" of ourselves. Reading is a bridge to new worlds, ideas, and possibilities. And just as libraries have been bridges from stagnancy and ignorance to knowledge and imagination, so too are libraries increasingly serving as a bridge back to the out-of-doors.

Consider Appleton's atrium, or the beautiful flowers adorning the outside of Menasha's Library, the use the Neenah Library makes of the riverfront, or the Bookworm Gardens in Sheboygan, the Windmill that increases the ambiance of Little Chute's library ... all are bridges back to nature.

Not surprisingly, Kaukauna's new library also has plans to plant an Interactive Learning Garden in an 8,500 square foot unused gravel space outside our children's area.

Much more than a flower garden or simply a place to sit and read, our Interactive Learning Garden is designed to feature six unique classroom experiences specially designed to stimulate imagination and re-root patrons in the natural world: a biology classroom featuring a butterfly garden, a literature classroom, an art classroom, a history classroom telling some of the story of the city and river, an archeology classroom with dinosaur bones to uncover, a music classroom and an amphitheater seating from 60 to 70 children to experience story times, concerts and plays. All in the out-of-doors.

Libraries are not at all what they seem. Four walls filled with books? No, that's just the disguise. Libraries are bridges leading out of our own lives and limitations back to nature, to places magical and new.

Anthony Wieczorek is the director of the Kaukauna Public Library. Representatives of Fox Cities libraries write a monthly column on the joys and attractions of public libraries.

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