

The Cure of Plant Blindness: A Walk Down Champlain Heights Trail

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We walked south from the Champlain Heights Elementary playground down the Red Alder Trail on the Champlain Heights Trail system. We stopped along the way to discuss various invasive and native plants.



1. Paper Birch Tree

This tree has bark that peels off in layers that look like paper

Something I didn't mention: Many First Nations people in British Columbia used birch bark as material for baskets, cradles, and canoes. They also used it for wrapping and storing food and for roofing pit houses. However, we mentioned that students should not just peel off large amounts of bark from the tree, without having a purpose for using it.



2. English holly

At the north entrance to the Red Alder Trail, we stopped to examine an English holly shrub that has grown as large as a tree.

We noted that the lower leaves were prickly, while the higher leaves were toothless and smooth.

We discussed how the prickles on the lower leaves are there to defend against herbivores (such as deer) and damage from humans, while the higher leaves do not need this protection.



3. Beaked hazelnut

We stopped to notice the yellow (male) flowers of the beaked hazelnut that hang from the tree in the winter.

In the fall the tree produces hazelnuts, that are held within a leaf-like casing that has a point, much like a beak.



4. Bamboo

We discussed how bamboo is native to Asian countries, such as China & Japan (where you can find whole bamboo forests).

If left unchecked in our area, it will continue to spread.



5. Tall Oregon grape vs. English holly

We stopped to compare the native tall Oregon grape (pictured above) with the English holly. These two plants are often confused. While the native tall Oregon grape produces “grape-like” purple berries, the English holly produces red, non-edible berries. The leaves of the tall Oregon grape grow opposite each other, while the leaves of the English holly are alternate. Students noted that they have successfully sprouted tall Oregon grape seeds in their class before.



6. Sword fern

We pointed out the native sword fern, whose fronds grow in a long, pointed shape (resembling a sword). Indigenous people traditionally cook and eat the roots as a vegetable.



7. Osoberry (Indigenous Plum)

The osoberry's name is derived from the Spanish word "oso" which means bear. When the first Spanish explorers arrived in our area, they noticed bears eating the fruit from this shrub, so they called it an osoberry. It is the first shrub to flower in our forested trail. It produces white flowers in March and then small, purple edible plums in June. The plums are small, not too sweet, and mostly filled by a pit. We reminded the students that they should never eat any berry that they are unfamiliar with, unless they have an informed adult present.



8. Himalayan blackberry

We stopped to look at the invasive Himalayan blackberry, which is identifiable by its 5 large rounded leaves growing on long canes that are covered by prickles. The canes have a 2-year life cycle. The first year the canes produce leaves. While the second year the canes produce flowers and edible blackberries. After this two-year cycle, the canes die. However, the roots will produce new canes the following spring. It is invasive as it spreads in large thickets, crowding out other native plants from growing.



9. Snags

We discussed that a standing, dead tree is called a snag. Snags serve a necessary purpose in the forest, as bugs feed on the dead wood and then birds feed on the bugs. Also, the pileated woodpecker pokes holes in the trees, looking for bugs, and these holes can provide homes for other birds and squirrels. Recently, the city has become

more aware of the value of leaving snags in the forest. So, now, they mark dead trees by spraying them with spray paint, but when they cut the tree, rather than leaving a stump, they often leave a standing snag.



10. Red Cedar stump

We examined a red cedar stump and noted that, despite the tree being dead, it provides an important place for other plants to grow. We saw growing from the cedar stump: osoberry, red huckleberry (pictured above), a paper birch tree, and many dwarf Oregon grape plants. We also noticed that there was a fallen tree and other branches near the stump. We discussed how this fallen wood is a feature of old growth forests, as the floor of an old growth forest is made up of approximately 25% fallen wood. This fallen wood breaks down to feed the forest floor and provides necessary food for bugs, which the birds then feed on.