



Letters to Nature Kids

December 2022 🌸 No. 10



Autumn woodland at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve

Dear Nature Kids,

If you read this during winter break, I hope you are having a wonderful time, taking time to celebrate holidays and maybe taking a walk somewhere. This is a month in which different faiths and cultures have holidays, but as a nature kid you know it's also a time to get outside, at least a little. It is early December as

I'm writing this, and many of the leaves have turned to yellow or orange. This seemed to happen almost overnight, and so all this color is a sort of surprise gift.



Blackjack oak

On a Sunday walk at Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve in Arlington, I wanted to see how the leaves had changed color. Which ones would be brightest? It was a cool day but not particularly cold, and the sky was gray with thin clouds. Many of the oak trees had leaves turning either a bright yellow or red. Most oaks at this preserve are either post oak or blackjack oak. The blackjacks were the more colorful, with some having yellow leaves and others with deep maroon (dark red) ones.

Brightest of all was the sumac, with orange to flaming red leaves. Sumac is a sort of shrub or small tree that grows where there are openings in the woods or in patches of prairie. Sometimes a clump of sumac grows and becomes a thicket that can take over and replace a patch of prairie. Today the thing about sumac was that it almost seemed to be on fire with color.



Sumac

I said that all this autumn color was a gift. Why is that? The sumac didn't go to the store, it just offered what it had. Not even with a plan to make anyone happy, it just did what sumacs do. The same with the oaks and poison ivy and other plants. In being who they are, doing what they do, they are a gift to us.

Some people are like that too, right? I bet you know someone who makes you feel happy and cared for just by being who they are. Like something warm and good has been given to you, even though it didn't come in a box tied with a ribbon. That's the kind of gift we get from some people and also from nature.



Poison ivy – pretty, but don't touch!

Lots of people will be getting gifts this month – it's part of the Christmas and Hanukkah traditions. Kwanzaa also includes gifts for children. And in the U.S. it has become customary for everyone, religious or not, to exchange gifts during December holidays. I hope for you the meaning of this runs deeper than just getting stuff. Giving and receiving gifts can be a way of honoring what is good and generous in all the world, including the people around us.

The wonderful thing is how we can be knitted into loving relationships with the life around us. In those relationships, giving and receiving happens easily and often. But also, it is especially wonderful that we sometimes give even when the recipient does not seem to deserve it or hasn't done anything to make us want to give.

That's the way it is in nature. For example, coralberry, a small shrub that we see in the woods, offers its berries to birds and small mammals freely. In return for the gift of berries, the animals help spread the seeds for new plants. They take care of each other without deciding who deserves it.

Junipers – people often call them “cedars” – are evergreen trees that produce clusters of beautiful



Coralberry (above) and juniper (below)



pale blue berries. When ripe, each carries a little burst of sweetness and a taste that might remind you of pine trees (do not eat berries or other parts of wild plants unless someone who knows them confirms that they're safe!). Many birds love them, and the berries are a gift that helps many birds get through cold winters.

At Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve, plants that were not a part of the original prairies and woodlands were taking over one area. That gave humans an opportunity to give back to the preserve that has given us so much. After a long process of hard work, a group of people has



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restored much of the “north prairie” to the meadow and savannah that would have lived there long ago. Nature and people, taking care of each other.

May the holidays bring you much happiness!

👁 Michael



A trail within the Sheri Capehart Nature Preserve

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