

15 MINUTE PRACTICE - BLESSING

(To be done early) in the Autumn Term

Growing a Horse Chestnut or a Sunflower

In many ways, we as human beings are like flowers, plants, or trees; to grow and flourish, we need good soil, lots of light and plenty of watering. We also need space to grow in a way which is not too crowding.

A flower, plant or tree which grows well nearly always brings joy and life to others. It might provide a habitat for wildlife, food for birds or bees, shelter for animals or beauty to those who appreciate it. By being a good tree, plant or flower, it can't help but bring life to others. In many ways human beings are like this.

Jesus told a very famous story about a tree, called the parable of the mustard seed. It goes like this: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches." (Matthew 13:31-32)

We are going to start growing a tree or a flower, and as we do so we are going to spend time thinking about how we could be like the tree in the parable which grows tall from small beginnings, and which blesses society and the earth with its beautiful and generous branches.

THE FRUIT/SEED – Potential

Hold the conker or seed in your hand. Now look at an image of a Horse Chestnut tree or a Sunflower; look at how big they become. As you hold the conker in your hand, think about how the seed/conker contains all the potential to become its grown-up self. One small seed can become something so big, so beautiful, and so life-giving.

Jesus says that we can be like one of these small seeds. Think about all the potential you have inside you to bless the world and make it a better, more beautiful and a more life-giving place. In turn, you could produce seeds in others which help them to grow too, just like you.

THE ROOT/NEED – Tending the Seed

The seed can only reach its potential though, if it is carefully tended and looked after; it needs to be given enough sunlight, water, shelter and space to grow.

We are now going to have a go at growing our own flowers or trees. As we do this, reflect on the care that you also need to give yourself and receive from others to grow and develop.

You will need:

- Small planting pots
- Compost
- Bucket of water
- Marker pens

How to grow your Horse Chestnut trees

1. Place your conkers in a container of water. (Discard those that float, these have dried out).
2. Using only the conkers that sink, plant them about 2cm deep individually in pots of soil/compost, between now and the end of November.

[The rest will not happen at school, but it would be helpful to give the instructions now and print them out for them to take home]

3. Water well and place in a sheltered spot outside.
4. Protect the pots from predators i.e. squirrels, mice etc. and from hard frosts. A cold frame is ideal, keep checking them to see if they need watering, but don't overwater.
5. The conkers will need to go through a period of cold temperatures to encourage them to germinate in the spring.
6. Keep your young trees watered and re-pot as they grow bigger.
7. Ask the landowner's permission before you plant your new trees into the big wide world, they can grow very large.

How to grow your Sunflowers

1. Sowing your seeds

Fill your small pots with compost to about 1cm from the top, to allow for watering. Make a small hole with your finger and drop a sunflower seed into the hole. Cover over with a little compost and water. Place your pots on a sunny, warm windowsill and water if the compost feels dry. Your sunflowers should appear in one to two weeks.

[The rest will not happen at school, but it would be helpful to give the instructions now and print them out for them to take home]

2. Growing On

When your plants are about 10cm tall you will need to 'harden them off' this means that you are getting them used to being planted outdoors. For about a week, during the day, stand your pots outside somewhere sheltered bringing them in at night.

After all risk of frost has passed, plant out your sunflowers in their final flowering positions, ideally somewhere sunny and sheltered with plenty of room, they can be planted in the ground or into large pots. You may need to protect the young plants with slug deterrent as their stems and leaves are a favourite with slugs and snails too.

3. Aftercare

As the plants grow support them by tying or clipping their stems to canes or trellis as the flower heads can become quite heavy making them vulnerable in strong winds. Keep well-watered during dry weather.

4. Harvesting

Sunflower seeds are a favourite with many species of garden birds, leave the sunflower heads on the plants in the Autumn/Winter and see which birds come to feed on them.

Alternatively pick the heads when they have turned brown leaving about 30cm of stem. Leave to dry out somewhere warm and airy before removing the seeds which can be stored to feed the birds during the winter months or saved to grow more Sunflowers next year.

THE SHOOT/FEED nurturing the growth

Before you finish the session, bring the children back to the parable of the Mustard Seed. Remind them that they are like the conker or seed which they have just planted; they have huge potential to bring goodness, beauty, and fruitfulness to the world.

They might like to think about one particular quality or aspect of themselves which they would like to cultivate and develop, something which could bless, nurture and in the future feed, nourish and bless the world, like the mustard tree does in the parable.

Invite the children to write what characteristic they wish to cultivate on the side of the plant pot, and each time they check and tend the pot and the flower over the coming weeks and months.

Remember to repot the flowers/tree shoots as they grow, just as they will need to revisit the characteristics they wish to grow and cultivate in themselves, to make more space and opportunity for further flourishing.