

UC Davis Arboretum Outdoor Education Program

“Odes to Plants”

Goals:

Students will learn a new way of communicating information about a chosen plant through poetry, which can incorporate personal values as well as facts. Through class brainstorming and individual writing, students share the poetry experience with each other.

Time: 30 minutes

Age: Grades 2 and up

Materials:

Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to a Cluster of Violets”

Chalkboard/whiteboard/flipchart

Paper

Writing utensils

Example Poems from Previous UC Davis Arboretum Visits

Background:

Odes are a traditional form of poetry in praise of something. Pablo Neruda, a well-known poet from Chile, wrote “Ode to a Cluster of Violets” to celebrate the extraordinary qualities of a common thing. One place to get inspiration for writing is to read works by famous writers, and incorporating some of Neruda’s language from “Ode to a Cluster of Violets” will help students learn new ways of talking about plants.

Procedure:

- 1) Read Pablo Neruda's “Ode to a Cluster of Violets” aloud to the students as a model poem, asking them to listen for words they like as well as words and phrases that they find memorable or surprising. This poem is translated from Spanish and can be read in either language to the class.

- 2) Create a word "pool", visible for the entire class on the chalkboard/whiteboard/flipchart, by asking the students to repeat the words and phrases they remembered from the poem. Write these favorite words or phrases on the board so the students can reference them while they create their poems. A word "pool" is simply a large drawn circle with all the brainstormed words inside.
- 3) Next create a second word pool from your UC Davis Arboretum visit. (See "UC Davis Arboretum Connection" below for ideas.) Ask the students to reflect on their visit and share things they remembered. If they cannot remember the exact names of things, they can describe them in other ways.
- 4) Now it's time for the students to create their own, individual odes to a plant of their choice. Encourage the students to choose phrases and/or words from both word pools to help expand their ideas. Students can also use their own words and phrases to complete their poems.

Remind students that the whole poem does not have to be in praise of their plant. They can say both positive and negative things about it, as long as they use specific, descriptive terms.

The beginnings of some of Neruda's lines ("You resemble _____," "Up close, your fragrance _____," and "You deliver _____") can be written on the board for optional use by students who might wonder how to get started.

One last reminder to the students: their grammar, spelling, punctuation and appearance of their poem can be whatever they choose. It does not have to be perfect or rhyme.

- 5) After 15-20 minutes of writing time, give students a chance to share with the class.

Extension:

Have your students create other types of poems (see example poems from previous UC Davis Arboretum visits) or have them illustrate their poems.

UC Davis Arboretum Connection:

"Odes to Plants" can further help personalize the UC Davis Arboretum experience for students. During their visit, students learned that plants and animals have adaptations that allow them to survive in different California environments. To connect this theme to "Odes to Plants," remind students of plants they saw in the UC Davis Arboretum (Valley Oak, Grey Pine a.k.a. Ghost Pine or Foothill Pine, Coast Redwood, California Poppy, Western Redbud, Toyon, and Prickly Pear cactus) and the special features those plants have that help them survive in their environments. Encourage them to write about these plants and their special features in their poems. California is also the land of extremes with tall mountains, hot deserts, wet coasts, and dry valleys, which can contribute to poetic descriptions.

To read more poems inspired by the UC Davis Arboretum, request a copy of **"Where Do I Walk? Poetic Perambulations in the UC Davis Arboretum by Writers of All Ages"** edited by Maria Melendez, Brooke Byrd, and Adam Smith. Copies can be purchased for \$5.00 from the Arboretum, 752-4880. All proceeds benefit the education program.

This activity was created by Maria Melendez, UC Davis Arboretum Writer in Residence, and modified by Megan Chiosso and Betsy Faber of the UC Davis Arboretum Education Department, 2003.

"Ode to a Cluster of Violets"
Pablo Neruda

ODES

by Pablo Neruda

TO

Selected & Illustrated by Ferris Cook

COMMON

Translated by Ken Krabbenhoft

THINGS

A Bulfinch Press Book



Ode to a cluster of violets

Crisp cluster
plunged in shadow.
Drops of violet water
and raw sunlight
floated up with your scent.
A fresh
subterranean beauty
climbed up from your buds,
thrilling my eyes and my life.

One at a time, flowers
that stretched forward
silvery stalks,
creeping closer to an obscure light
shoot by shoot in the shadows,
till they crowned
the mysterious mass
with an intense weight of perfume
and together
formed a single star
with a far-off scent and a purple center.

Poignant cluster,
intimate
scent

of nature,
you resemble
a wave, or a head of hair,
or the gaze
of a ruined water nymph
sunk in the depths.
But up close,
in your fragrance's
blue brazenness,
you exhale the earth,
an earthly flower, an earthen
smell and your ultraviolet
gleam
is volcanoes' faraway fires.

Into your loveliness I sink
a weathered face,
a face that dust has often abused.
You deliver
something out of the soil.
It isn't simply perfume,
nor simply the perfect cry
of your entire color, no: it's
a word sprinkled with dew,
a flowering wetness with roots.

Fragile cluster of starry
violets,
tiny, mysterious
planet
of marine phosphorescence,
nocturnal bouquet nestled in green leaves:
the truth is
there is no blue word to express you.

Better than any word
is the pulse of your scent.

Example Poems from Previous UC Davis Arboretum Visits

My Family (around Putah Creek)

My brother is a mallard duck looking for his mate, with his green head he can show off to any girl in town.

My mother is a buckeye with her branches swaying over me.

My father is a squirrel with acorns in his cheeks, chuckling.

My cat is gray with white droplets that make her look like she's been in a rain storm. My other cat is a fluffy spiky pinecone.

I am a quiet but happy little squirrel hopping from one tree to another. I can fly through the air on a joyful flight.

—Teresa Ludwig, 4th grade
Willett Elementary, Davis

As I Walk Through the Arboretum

Inspired by Joseph Bruchac's "Walking at Night in the Desert"

As I walk
through the Arboretum
I ask the redbud with its flames
of flowers,
May I pick your flowers?
When it answers, I hear the flowers snap
off the branches and fall into my hand.

As I walk by the oak tree, I ask
May I have some shade?
And when it replies, I feel the coolness
of the branches blocking the boiling sun.

—Anna LeFlore, 3rd grade
Cesar Chavez Elementary, Davis

In My Dream

In my dream I saw a determined acorn.
He was running as hard as he could.
He stumbled, fell, and rolled off into the creek.
The bossy grinding rock ran closer.
The acorn was wounded.
It was almost night,
“Help,” cried Acorn. “Help me I’m wounded.”
“This isn’t a game, come for me.”
An egret came and carried him home.

—Ashi Imtiaz, 4th grade
Davis

A Pound of Color: Flora and Fauna

I watch the screeching vulture high above me,
And the bearded dragon zooms across my face.
When little animals poke themselves
on my prickly cactus, it makes me laugh.
Sometimes I laugh so hard I start a sand storm.
I am the desert.

—Samantha Gaynor, 4th grade
Patwin Elementary, Davis

Poems selected from *Poetry is Everywhere: An Anthology of Wild Yolo Poetry*. Selected by Maria Melendez, UC Davis Arboretum Writer in Residence.

