



Youth Connect Science & Art

by Janell Wehr, Horticulture Educator

They say *horticulture* is both the **science** and **art** of growing plants. Wood County 4-H youth had the opportunity to learn about both aspects of horticulture at Project Discovery Days.

Janell Wehr, Extension Wood County Horticulture Educator, teamed up with the Wood County 4-H program at this year's Project Discovery Day, providing an opportunity to construct Kokedamas (moss balls), a traditional Japanese growing technique that dates back to the Edo period (1600s).

In this program, youth were introduced to multiple disciplines of science, including physical and cultural geography, soil science and plant physiology. They were introduced to Japanese aesthetics of minimalism and the importance that nature plays in Japanese culture. They also learned about the concept of *wabi-sabi*, or finding the beauty in imperfection.



As the youth listened to traditional music from the Edo period, they constructed their Kokedama creations. They learned about *biophilia*, the hypothesis that states humans have an innate need to connect with nature. They were encouraged to participate in a mindfulness activity of smelling the moss and imagining walking in the forest in June after a rain shower.

Constructing Kokedamas requires patience and focus, allowing the youth to connect the relationship between gardening activities and a whole sense of wellbeing. *"This is so calming!"* one youth exclaimed.

Youth were able to each create two Kokedamas and were encouraged to showcase them as unique entries for the dish garden category at the 2025 Central Wisconsin State Fair.

Improving Watersheds and Water Resources by Supporting Citizen-led Groups

by Anna Mitchell, Natural Resources Educator

In recent decades, nonpoint source pollution from agricultural, urban, forested, and other land uses has remained the primary cause of ongoing water quality concerns. In Wisconsin, these issues often manifest as surface water algal blooms and sedimentation, and as elevated levels of nitrate and other contaminants in groundwater. A unique response to these challenges has been the formation of citizen-led watershed organizations.

Numerous communities throughout Wisconsin have initiated these grassroots efforts to improve the overall health of their local watersheds and water resources, such as lakes, streams, and drinking water. In fact, there are more than 80 citizen-based watershed groups across Wisconsin, each varying widely in their mission, membership, and level of organization. Some groups focus on educating communities about their local watersheds and water resources, others seek solutions to address water quality concerns through conservation agricultural approaches, while some advocate for protecting and enhancing the state's vast water resources.

These groups play a vital role in improving Wisconsin's watersheds and water resources, but they often face limitations due to their reliance on donated time from their members. It can be a significant challenge for these groups to acquire the skills needed to form and support a citizen-led watershed organization, address local conservation needs, speak to pollution concerns, track their success, and more. Natural Resources Educators, such as Anna Mitchell, partner with these groups to help address their internal needs and support their efforts to improve water quality.

In Central Wisconsin, Anna supports 12 citizen-led watershed organizations spanning from Langlade County down to Adams County and Juneau County. Nine of the groups Anna supports are farmer-led watershed protection groups, and three are citizen-based lake or watershed protection groups. Anna's support varies based on the needs of each group and can include hosting facilitated conversations between watershed stakeholders, educating group members on current water quality research and policy, assisting with strategic planning and goal setting, evaluating the impact of a group's efforts, guiding workshops for leadership training, and much more.

The collaborative efforts of citizen-led watershed organizations, supported by dedicated partners, are crucial in addressing Wisconsin's water quality challenges. These grassroots initiatives not only foster community engagement and education but also drive meaningful conservation action. By continuing to support and expand these efforts, we can ensure the protection and enhancement of Wisconsin's precious water resources.

