



by Karen Stephens

## Fall Offers Families A Variety of Sensory, Seasonal Fun

These activities will help you and the kids enjoy fall's bonanza of sensory delights. Don't rush to fit them all in. Pick a few and enjoy them to the hilt; it will be time well spent and time well remembered.

1. Fall colors look best through clear windows. That calls for family window washing with sponges and squeegees. The wetter everyone gets, the more fun!
2. Gather cornhusks, milkweed pods, and pussy willows to make dolls or animals. Dried grain, grasses, and seeds can be glued on for hair and decoration. Toothpicks and pipe cleaners make good connectors. Seeds can be strung for doll jewelry.
3. Fall includes goodbyes, so stage a party to bid summer creatures a fond farewell. It's especially fitting for migrating species like geese, robins, or monarch butterflies. At dinner, toast your garden's scarecrow; it's the least you can do after his hot summer of solitary and steadfast labor! Just provide a theme and the kids' imaginations will provide the fun.
4. Cross-country traveling makes birds thirsty. Set up a water station for south-bound birds by placing an aluminum pie pan on a tree stump. Keep a log of species that visit your rest stop.
5. Visit a nursery and select a sugar maple tree to plant. Before going to the nursery, read *Red Leaf, Yellow Leaf* by Lois Ehlert] (New York]: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1991). It's a lovely children's book that shows children how trees end up in nurseries for families to plant.
6. Set up a Sunflower Café for the birds! On a fence, tree, or wall, hang fall decorations made with items birds love to eat. Dried sunflower heads hung from twine make a perfect base. A grape vine wreath works well, too. To the base, add items like flower seeds, acorns, field corn kernels, seed heads from thistle and milkweeds, and ears of field corn.
7. Give each child an instamatic or disposable camera and walk the neighborhood on a fall photo shoot. Kids can send doubles to family members who don't have a colorful fall.
8. Find a tree to sit under. Sketch it, watercolor it, or write a poem in its honor. Read a story under it, or go ahead, sing a song to it if the mood strikes you.
9. Stretch out in a family-size hammock to be showered with a downpour of leaves.
10. Make a "Leaves of My Park" identification book. Collect newly fallen leaves. Place them between the pages of a thick book to dry a week. Once dry, use glue-sticks or double-stick tape to attach one leaf per page into a notebook or journal. By each leaf, write down everything your child knows about it, i.e. name, size, shape, etc.
11. Use dried leaves to create collages. Collect many leaves of different shapes and sizes. Then arrange, and even overlap them, to look like other objects — birds, fish, and butterflies — whatever leaves out in your kid's imagination. The paperback children's book, *Look What I Did with a Leaf!* by Morteza E. Sohi (New York: Walker & Co., 1995) provides lots of inspiration for leaf art.
12. Plant bulbs for spring blooms: crocus, daffodils, tulips, hyacinth. So children take pride in the fruits of their fall labor, take *before* photographs as kids huff and puff during planting, then in spring take *after* photos with them by the blooms.

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delights.

13. Have kids collect seeds from your flower garden. Show them how to organize them in separate envelopes, labeled and dated. Save them for spring planting.
14. Stroll an arboretum. As you walk, note and compare the differences between evergreen trees and the more colorful deciduous ones. How much detail can your children observe? *Autumn Leaves* by Ken Robbins (New York: Scholastic, 1998) is a good leaf identification book for preschoolers to age 8.
15. Visit an apple orchard. Help kids cook different recipes with apples: cobblers, applesauce, apple cakes, crisps, tarts, pies, turnovers, donuts, muffins, baked apples, dried apples, pancakes. *The Apple Pie Tree* by Zoe Hall (New York: Scholastic, 1996) is a fun follow-up read for preschoolers to kindergarten. *The Apple Cake* by Nienke van Hichtum (Herndon, VA: Anthroposophic Press, 1997) is good for early elementary kids and even comes with Granny's Apple Cake recipe!
16. Go through your recipe file and select your family's favorite fall recipes. Older children can type the recipes into a computer. Print the pages to create your own fall cookbook, named after YOUR family, of course. Younger kids can illustrate the book with fall drawings and stickers. Send autographed copies to friends and relatives.
17. Go on a butterfly hunt. Younger kids can make a color list of butterflies they find. They also enjoy pretending to be butterflies. Older kids can list species they identify and the plants they feed on. Sketching butterflies is a natural extension of their observations.
18. Bundle up in a blanket, sit on a candlelit porch, and listen to fall night sounds. Listen for crickets, cicadas, tree frogs, and the backwards whinny and cooing of the eastern screech owl. *Wind Says Good Night* by Katy Rydell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000) is a good bedtime story for porch reading; it's all about night sounds.
19. Take a caterpillar hunt. Touch them gently. How do they feel? Where are they going?
20. Find a corn maze to meander. Afterwards, read *Corn Belt Harvest* by Raymond Bial (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991). If you chance upon chewed on corncobs, ponder what might have eaten them. The children's book, *Raccoons and Ripe Corn* by Jim Arnosky (Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1987), *Whitetails for Kids* by Tom Wolpert (Chanhassen, MN: Creative Publishing International, 1991), or *Whitetail Magic for Kids* by Daniel Cox (Milwaukee, WI: Gareth Stevens Publishing, 1997) can give the kids some clues!
21. Visit a pumpkin patch or attend a pumpkin festival. Buy a pumpkin for home cooking. Try out a *from scratch* recipe for pumpkin: pie, muffins, bread, soup, or custard. Together, read *The Pumpkin Patch* by Elizabeth King (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996).
22. Visit a park and, where allowed, make a campfire. Without a doubt, make s'mores! If you're adventurous, cool nights make for wonderful tent sleeping, even in your own backyard.
23. Have kids collect fall nuts, berries, feathers, and foliage to create centerpieces for the coffee table or fireplace mantel.
24. Have kids cut out fall pictures from nature magazines. Glue them to cardboard then cut them into large pieces for a fall puzzle. Or kids can cut the pictures into smaller pieces to be glued onto paper for a colorful collage.
25. Use colored chalk to create fall murals on your concrete porch or sidewalk.
26. Go for a hayrack ride. Talk about the scents and sounds.
27. Treat your neighbors to beautiful front porch displays using nature decorations like gourds, mums, pumpkins, corn stalks, bittersweet, broom corn, Indian corn, hay bales and decorative seed pods.
28. Canoe or kayak a river or lake. Spy hawks and great blue herons, and banks overflowing with fall flowers like aster, ironweed, yellow cup plants, and wild sunflowers. (Wear lifejackets!)
29. Bike or walk wooded trails in parks. Breathe the scents of fall. How do kids describe them? On the way home, recall wildlife you saw.
30. Go to a fall festival to get ideas for crafts children can make for holiday gifts.
31. Watch a Homecoming Parade. Root for the home team!
32. Twirl amongst falling leaves and pretend you're in a leaf blizzard.
33. In the middle of the yard (not in ditches near cars!), rake leaves into piles and JUMP! Over and over, bury kids with leaves so they can pop up like jack-in-the-boxes to scare the wits out of you! What better way is there for them to feel powerful and silly at the same time?
34. Make turtles or other animals out of nutshells squirrels leave behind.
35. Collect pinecones. Add string to hang them from a tree branch or balcony railing. Cover the pinecones in peanut butter and then roll them in birdseed. Hang the pinecone feeders in trees for a bird feast.
36. Watch a spider spinning a web. What gets caught?
37. Put large white socks OVER hiking or tennis shoes. Take a walk in woodlands or an open, grassy field. At home, count how many different seeds the socks collected. What are they?

38. Turn over a stone or log. Using a magnifying glass, investigate the pathways and homes creatures have made there.
39. Fly a kite in brisk fall winds.
40. Chase puffs of milkweed seeds as they fly by. Where do they go? Catch them if you can. How do they feel?

### For More Information...

about creative parenting ideas, check out the Parenting Exchange Library at [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com).

- Nature Connections for Children related articles #1, #2, #3, #4, #5, #6, #7

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. She writes a weekly column for parents in her local newspaper. Karen is author of two books and frequent contributor to *Child Care Information Exchange*.

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