

Making observations in nature is a way to connect with your environment. If you enjoy spending time in a garden or natural space, taking some time to record what you observe can be a valuable exercise. Observational records collected through time allow you to remember what you saw, what species visited your space, what the temperature or weather conditions were on a particular date during a particular season, and much more. Ultimately, observations can become a critical addition to a scientific study about how things may be varying or changing through time.

Observing plants and animals involves noticing and recording seasonal changes through time. Every species moves through a series of life cycle stages, and many stages respond to cues in the environment. Those cues can include temperature, day length, and moisture. The study of these life cycle stages is called phenology and the observable stages are called phenophases. Scientists, gardeners, agriculturists, and land managers are interested in studying the long-term cyclical timing of these phenophases to better understand how species may be responding to seasonal changes and, ultimately, to climate.

You can begin to make some of your own observations in your yard, park, or local garden by using the included observation sheet. If you have ever done a journaling activity in your garden or favorite outdoor space you know the benefit is not only writing down what you see, but also having a record of what happened to refer to in the future. If you have not yet made such observations, use the observation sheet as a guide to practice recording some things you see happening with plants and animals in your space. The more detail you record each time, the more valuable the information and the easier it will be to remember what you meant.

It is ideal to make plant and animals observations at least once a week, if not more often, so you can see what changes are happening. If you don't see anything in your observation place during your observation time, it is important to note that as well. You'll then be able to better understand the first time you do see something. If you don't feel comfortable recording or identifying something on the list don't worry. You'll get better with practice. Leaving blanks is ok. You'll find that there are many online resources, field guides, and people to help you identify your species and their phenophases.

Print out one of the observation sheets for each visit to your outdoor space. Note the weather conditions, including temperature, and the time you spent looking. You can also record the method you used to observe. This method can be either a walk or a hike, a stationary visit (meaning you did not move around, rather just sat, looked, and listened), or a structured search (walked in a specific pattern to search for species).

Once you are comfortable making observations on a regular basis using this guide, check out how observations like this can be recorded for use in local, regional, national, and international phenology research programs. Visit *Nature's Notebook* website (www.nn.usanpn.org), create a user account, and record your observations in the National Phenology Database for others to use as well.