

**Are you really outside everyday for the entire length of the program?**

Yes, our Gnomes are outside in the rain, snow, wind, and sunshine from 8:30 am to 12:30 pm! We strongly believe that there is no such thing as “bad weather,” just “bad gear.” We do have an indoor space, however, we only enter it during storytime or in extreme weather. If Natick Public Schools is closed or has a delay, we are also closed.

**Are you a licensed Early Education Center?**

No, Forest Gnomes is an occasional care program for preschool aged children. We operate under public programming at Natick Community Organic Farm.

**Are there separate sessions for different age groups?**

Each session (M/W and T/Th) of Gnomes is a mixed age group (3-5 year olds) and we try our best to make the gender ratios as equal as possible.

A great part of our program is that the mixed age group enables older and/or returning gnomes to adopt leadership and mentor roles as they bridge the age gap with younger gnomes. Within this environment, Gnomes can find friends who they truly connect with, regardless of age.

**Where do children use the bathroom?**

All Gnomes must be potty-trained before beginning programming. We have a compost toilet in the Gnome woods that children are welcome to use. Most Gnomes choose to do a “tree-pee” and use the “facili-trees.”

**Are the Gnomes ever on the farm?**

Drop-off and pick-up are on the farm, however, once programming begins, we hike out into the woods for the duration of the day. During special farm events, such as maple syruping, animal births, and sheep shearing, Gnomes visit the farm and participate in these activities.

We also have an additional program called “Friday Farm Time,” for preschool aged children, which runs on Fridays from 9 am until 12 pm. Gnomes can assist with farm chores, such as: collecting eggs, feeding the rabbits, and spreading hay. In addition to the traditional Forest Gnome program, your child can also sign up to spend time on the farm. For more information about this program is available on our website under “Public Programs”

**Do you allow “rough play”?**

Yes, we embrace risky play at Forest Gnomes. Gnomes are encouraged to climb trees and play structures, run, and engage in consensual rough and tumble play. We do not play with

traditional toys; Gnomes are welcome to use child-sized tools, this includes: metal shovels, pots and pans, rakes, wheelbarrows, and most importantly: sticks!

We strongly believe that by engaging in this type of play, Gnomes develop strong risk management skills and spatial awareness, recognize their own comfort levels, and challenge themselves while building confidence. Through this type of play, Gnomes learn to self-advocate and listen to their peers.

### **How do children transition after Forest Gnomes?**

We understand that our program is untraditional, but former Gnomes have successfully transitioned into every type of school environment. Over past 10 years of Forest Gnomes, we have seen our Gnomes enter traditional Kindergarten classrooms, homeschool environments, and Waldorf and Montessori classrooms. Graduating Forest Gnomes are equipped with skills, like conflict resolution, emotional regulation, problem solving, compromise, and creativity, which serve them for years to come.

### **Your website says that you are “Waldkindergarten? What is a waldkindergarten?**

Waldkindergartens originated in Germany as outdoor preschools, where children fostered an authentic connection with the natural world, and the outdoors served as their classroom.

We are not a Waldorf or Reggio Emilia program. We are also not a nature preschool.

Forest Gnomes is inspired by waldkindergartens and the forest kindergartens of Europe and is a child-led, play-based program. Our program was originally founded in 2009 and inspired by Richard Louv’s “The Last Child in the Woods,” as well as the national children in nature movement.

### **What is the difference between nature preschools and forest kindergartens?**

Nature preschools emerged as part of the environmental education movement, primarily in nature centers throughout North America. The curriculum of these preschools is nature-based and although children spend some time outside, they also spend a great deal of the day indoors.

Forest Kindergartens originated in Europe and children spend 90% of the program outside, regardless of weather. Forest Kindergartens emphasize unstructured free-play and risky play rather than a set curriculum. Teachers adopt the role of facilitator and give children the freedom and space to create an environment for imaginative free play.

Forest Gnomes is a forest kindergarten!

## **What does a typical day in the woods look like?**

After being dropped off at 8:30 am on the farm, gnomes gather in the Gnomes garden and begin hiking out into the woods. Gnomes walk, run, jump, dance, and crawl at their own pace until they reach designated “Gnome Stop Signs” along the trail. We always have one teacher in the front of the group, an intern in the middle, and another teacher in the rear.

Once we reach the Gnome woods, backpacks are dropped off, and Gnomes continue their hike. This is a great time for Gnomes to socialize, run, and play until we reach our trail snack destination. Here, we gather for songs and a delicious snack (organic apples, cheese, and rice cakes). After snack, Gnomes play, climb trees, or create imaginative games until it is time to venture back to the Gnome woods.

When we arrive back in the Gnome woods, their time is their own and they free to engage in unstructured play with our many tools, structures, and swings. Teachers and our intern float around the space to observe and assist if needed (problem-solving, conflict resolution, emotional regulation, or if a Gnome needs to “tree pee”).

After play, Gnomes gather around the communal table for “Hot Snack,” which consists of either organic oats or brown rice with various toppings. We eat together and afterwards, each Gnome is responsible for completing a job (dish dryer, collecting compost, sweeping the Gnome Home porch, returning shovels to the tool shed, etc..). Only when the Gnome woods are clean and all jobs have been completed, do we transition to storytime. Gnomes enter the cozy Gnome Home for a short story. Then, we put our backpacks back on and head back to the farm for pick-up at 12:30 pm!

**\*\*You may have noticed that we did not specify times within our day, besides drop-off and pick-up. This is because our daily rhythm is flexible and adapts to the interests and needs of the group dynamic on that given day. We strive to provide our Gnomes with the space and time they need to explore, play, and form connections with each other and the natural world.**