

### **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 are closed or have 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 (3.4-5 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.

Forest Gnomes operates Monday - Thursday, and families have the option to add Friday Farmers as an additional day. Forest Gnomes are required to attend at least twice a week and the options are either M/W or T/TH. If adding a third day, families may choose which day is their additional day and this can include a Forest Gnome day or the Fridays on the Farm program.

### **Where do children use the bathroom?**

All Gnomes must be fully potty-trained and independent with toileting 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 on the Farm,” for preschool aged children, which runs on Fridays from 8:30 am until 12:30 pm. Participants assist with farm chores, such as: collecting eggs, feeding the rabbits, and spreading hay.

### **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, and former Gnomes have successfully transitioned into every type of school environment. Over the past 15 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?**

The Forest Gnomes day starts at 8:30am. After our Gnomes say their goodbyes to their Grown-ups at our Hug and Kiss Post, we gather for a morning circle where we take time to greet each other, say hello to Mother Earth with our morning song, and take a mindful moment to notice the many sounds near and far on the farm. When our circle has concluded we head to the stream for exploration and play, and then we head out to the Gnomes Woods! Gnomes walk, run, jump, dance, and crawl at their own pace until they reach the back pack shelters in the Gnomes Home. Backpacks are placed on the hooks of the backpack shelter and water

bottles are placed on our Gnome Snack Table. We will meet briefly to discuss the plan for the day.

If we are having a campfire and cooking project we will take a smaller hike in through the woods and spend the majority of our day in the Gnomes playscape area. Gnomes will help gather the tinder and prepare the fire. The Gnomes are offered the opportunity to help with the cooking project, which could include cutting, adding in ingredients, and mixing ingredients together. Some of our cooking projects have included: hot cinnamon apples, roasted delicata squash, popcorn, apple cobbler, and stick bread.

On non-campfire cooking days, we will take a much longer hike and prepare our trail snack while being out on the trail! Gnomes spend both their time in the Gnomes Woods and on the trail playing, socializing, and running until trail snack time. Teachers float around the space to observe and assist if needed (problem-solving, conflict resolution, emotional regulation, or if a Gnome needs to “tree pee”). They also work with the Gnomes on taking turns to prepare the trail snack (cutting the apples and cheese along with setting out the water bottles).

Once the trail snack has been prepared, we gather for songs and stories and a delicious snack of apples, cheese, and rice cakes. When snack time has concluded, the Gnomes play, climb trees, create imaginative games and participate in nature based activities of choice (nature art, building fairy homes, observing bugs, etc...). Teachers take time to observe Gnomes and their interests. From these observations, the teachers create small lessons that further the Gnomes' knowledge. Gnomes may choose to participate in a lesson or continue with their play.

*Observation and lesson example: Gnomes are noticing frogs near the pond and are showing an interest in learning about frogs. The teachers will create observation lessons to help Gnomes learn about the frogs' habitats, what they eat, and their life cycle.*

After play, Gnomes clean up their tools from their play and gather at our community table for *Hot Snack!* “Hot Snack,” which consists of either 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, etc...). Only when the Gnome woods are clean and all jobs have been completed, do we transition to our gratitude circle. Gnomes enter the cozy Gnome Home or the log circle to enjoy a story and to share out our appreciations of the day. 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.