

# Gardening with Children

## Every Child Belongs in a Garden



As the saying goes, more than a seed is planted in a garden. Children can learn not just about how natural systems work in a garden—what critters and plants live where and what do they need to survive, but also about themselves.

Helping plan, plant and tend a garden can cultivate attributes and life skills such as responsibility, independence, leadership empathy/caring, teamwork and problem solving.

Children often don't know where their food comes from and have no idea of the energy and work it takes to grow, transport, store and prepare their food.

If they don't have some sort of relationship to the natural world, they won't be prepared to make wise decisions about it.

### **A few ideas to help get started gardening with children:**

**Start small**, and build on success. A 3'x3' plot or raised bed is plenty for a young gardener. As their success and interest increases, enlarge the garden.

**Involve children** in the planning and give age-appropriate choices. For a child younger than 5, offer two choices. As they age, children can accept a wider array of choices.

**Give a child his/her own plot.** Their interest will be higher if it belongs to them.

**Keep planting simple**, especially for young children, by choosing plants that have big seeds such as sunflowers, peas, beans cucumbers, pumpkins, squashes.

### **Grow plants children love to eat and look at. Try:**

- Sturdy plants (bush or pole beans, sunflowers, marigolds).
- Munchable plants (cherry tomatoes, snow peas).
- Sensory plants fuzzy (dusty miller); prickly (squash vines); rubbery (begonias); smooth (peppers).
- Plants of different sizes (tall sunflowers; huge-leaved squashes; tiny-leaved thyme).

**Capture a sense of fun and design.** Plant a Pizza Garden, grown in the shape of a wheel with each wedge planted with a pizza ingredient: peppers, tomatoes, onions, garlic.

Don't forget the "cheese" (marigolds) and "crust" (either plant wheat or oats or just use hay or straw as mulch to represent it).

Rainbow gardens are always a hit. Just choose plants that represent the colors of the rainbow (red salvia, yellow marigolds, orange marigolds, green curly parsley, dark blue petunias, purple ageratum and pink/lavender ageratum).

## **Additional tips:**

**Teach about tools and how to handle them safely.** Children don't need complicated tools. Child-size tools will help, but buy the sturdy ones. Other than that, regular trowels and hand cultivators work well. (The adult plastic ones are safer and lighter to handle). Buckets and plastic pots to match a child's size are essential and great for moving rocks and compost.

**Give children clearly defined places to plant.** Create mounds, like mini raised beds (picture a mound the size and shape of a loaf of French bread) and have them plant in the TOP of them. Mulch in the troughs between the mounds.

**Plant an extra row,** so children can share what they grow. Generosity is a wonderful thing and children are never too young to learn it.

**Give them clearly defined places to walk.** Use carpet squares for pathways and they will always know where to walk and where not to. This avoids the need for constant "Don't step on the plants!" warnings.

**Water them as well as the plants.** Gardening should be fun and on hot days there is nothing better than getting wet. Figure out what ground rules you feel comfortable with, but in general don't worry about getting clothing wet. As a sign of respect however, ask whether they would want their head, hands or whole body wet. You'd want the same courtesy.

For safety's sake, avoid animal manures and pesticides in a child's garden. Children are especially vulnerable to the effects of commercial pesticides, including some "organic" preparations. Even composted animal manures may still harbor harmful microorganisms.

**Visit the garden each day** to monitor for plant problems. Are those caterpillars on the cabbages friends or foes? Do the beans have a plant disease or some other problem? What's been eating the sunflowers? Teach them to identify problems early, and explain why preventive strategies work best.

**Become a scientist!** Exercise your curiosity and engage children's. Try a few experiments in the garden.

If someone asks, "What if we plant the seed really deep?"

Instead of saying it won't work, say, "Let's be scientists and find out what happens."

**Make tending fun.** Make a list together of the things that need to be done to help take care of the garden.

Then make a wheel with a spinner and have adults and kids take turns spinning the dial to see who does what. Keep taking turns until the tasks are done.

You can also, make a pack of index cards with the tasks on them, then simply "pick a card" to get tasks assigned.

**Munch, crunch, cook and eat!** Foster good nutrition by harvesting and trying out the foods you grow together in the garden.

You'll encourage children to eat more fruits and vegetables.

**Increase the exercise value of your gardens.** Gardening is great exercise, but ratchet that up with weed relays, laps of tag around the outside of the garden or other active games.

**Celebrate!** Create a family or neighborhood gathering to have your children show off their accomplishments and share their produce. Include some cooking and eating and fun activities that they can share with others.