

Gardening with Kids

By Margaret Murphy, Horticulture Outreach Specialist

Gardening is a great way to connect (or reconnect) kids to nature but it can offer so much more! Gardens allow children to interact and get curious about the natural world. Figuring out what a plant needs to grow. How does the temperature affect your garden? What happens if it doesn't rain for a while or if it rains too much? Which bugs like which plants? Gardening is an easy way to peak your child's interest in natural science. Then there are the math skills they can practice by counting seeds, measuring out space between plants or rows, or keeping track of how many tomatoes one plant can produce and how much does that give your family to eat? Other wonderful things they can learn include keen observation skills, responsibility, nurturing and, of course, patience. Plus, creating a garden space just for kids is just a good way to encourage some fun, outdoor family time this summer.

Here are a few suggestions for planning a children's garden. Consider the garden design. Make it fun. Create interesting geometric patterns like triangles, circles, or squares. Perhaps draw out a pet's name or a child's initials. If space is a challenge, think about a container garden on a deck or patio. Get creative with types of containers to use such as decorated pots, bowls, or cups. Or go even further outside the box and plant in an old boot, or a childhood toy.

Encourage kids to decorate their garden with figurines or painted stones. Use colorful labels to mark the plant rows.

Incorporate a theme into the garden. Set up a Rainbow Garden that includes all colors of the rainbow. An Alphabet Garden challenges you to find a plant for each letter of the alphabet. Plant a Butterfly Garden that provides food for both butterflies and caterpillars. Pizza Gardens can also be fun. Grow the ingredients for a homemade pizza including tomatoes, basil, and oregano. If grown in their own garden, you may be able to sneak in some onion and green pepper. If you have space, try building a sunflower or corn hut.

If possible, grow a variety of plants. A mixture of herbs, fruits, vegetables and flowers can make your child's garden more interesting and engaging. Choose plants with very different flowers shapes such as bleeding hearts, snapdragons, lilies, or sunflowers. Try vegetables with unusual colors like rainbow chard, yellow tomatoes or purple carrots. Think about how we use our senses to learn. Many plants have curious textures like Lamb's Ear, which is soft and wooly to the touch. Plus, different plants can have vastly different smells or no smell at all. Crush a leaf of mint or other garden herbs and enjoy!

Use this as an opportunity to teach your kids where their food comes from. Show them that food can be fun and healthy. Plant foods they can nibble right from the garden. As a kid, I use to love eating peas and tomatoes right off the vine. Try to plant disease resistant varieties to avoid using pesticides. Give new recipes a try with your garden harvest.

Don't forget to teach them about proper garden maintenance. Make a game of weeding and watering. Having smaller tools for younger children may help them get more involved.

If you are unsure of your child's interest, keep it simple. Promote the idea of keeping a gardening journal. This way they can keep track of what worked or didn't work and jot down ideas for next year. And if your child's garden yields more weeds than anything else or the neighborhood critters end up eating more of the produce than you, don't despair; it's the journey along the way that counts. Hopefully, gardening will cultivate a lifelong interest that they can pass on to their own children.

Happy Gardening!