

# Discovery in Gardening is Terrific

By Gail Messett  
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## **DigIt! A program just for young students**

The DigIt (Discovery in Gardening Is Terrific) program was designed by WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners to provide schools in Skagit County with a gardening curriculum taught to second and third grade students. The in-class lessons are then reinforced by a field trip in late spring to the WSU Discovery Garden on Memorial Highway in Mount Vernon.

The field trip, led by WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners, provides hands on activities in composting, planting, garden art, adaptive tools and designs, insects and animals in the garden, and plant dyes. Children are accompanied by their teachers and volunteer parents. It is a full day of exploration and discovery.

Children are grouped into six teams and then sent off to one of six different stations. After a 20-minute hands-on lesson, they move to the next station. Somewhere in the middle, a lunch break and short recess is wedged in.

- At **Garbage to Garden, It's Compost Time**, students join Callie Martin, Skagit County Waste Reduction/Recycling Education Specialist at the Discovery Garden compost and vermicompost (aka worm bin) area. Here, they learn that food comes from the soil and soil is formed by the decomposition of living things. They find out what things are compostable and what worms can and cannot eat. (Worms say “yes” to eggshells and coffee and “no” to citrus, meat and dairy.) They can touch, smell and measure the temperature of living material going through the compost process. Students get a close look at an actual worm bin where food is actively decomposing thanks to the worms. Picking up worms is optional.
- At the **DigIt Garden**, the children learn about tool safety, soils, nutrient requirements for healthy plants and facts about farming in the Skagit Valley. The students then plant corn, beans and squash and learn about the Native American lore of the Three Sisters Garden. They learn that corn provides a ladder for the bean vines that provide nitrogen to the corn. The squash vines and foliage eventually cover the ground, shade out weeds and help the soil retain moisture. The spiny squash also discourage small predators.
- At the **Art Project**, students take a moment to observe the shapes and colors of nature and transpose what they see to a paper drawing. Modeling after Georgia O'Keefe, they learn that she loved things of nature like flowers, bones and rocks. Sometimes her portrayals looked real, sometimes abstract. The students are encouraged to draw a blossom with bright chalks and colored paper of their choice, and they get to decide if their painting will be real or abstract. Either way, it's a work of art for their parents.

- At the **Enabling Garden**, students find adaptive aids that permit easier and more enjoyable gardening for persons of varying disabilities. Special design features such as raised beds, easy walkways, sitting ledges and easy reach containers create better access for those in wheelchairs. Adaptive tools include those that extend someone’s reach and those with handles that are more easily held. For the visually impaired, a garden design can include plants with texture, fragrance and inanimate objects like small stones that allow one to “see” by touching.
- At the **Naturescape and Native Plant Gardens**, students look for animal tracks in and around the gardens. Both gardens have ponds with good frog sightings. Elsewhere, students find evidence of mason bees, swallows, butterflies, bats, moles, birds’ nests, and rabbits.
- At the **Plant Dyes Project**, students learn how plant dyes have been used by various cultures throughout history. Using flowers collected from the Discovery Garden, the children arrange their blossoms and greenery on a square of white cotton fabric. They place a piece of wax paper over the collage, pick up a hammer, and start hammering. This bruises the flowers and releases the colors onto the fabric. Students are encouraged to make a lot of noise. Then they get to take their artwork home.



**School children plant the DigIt! garden** during their field trip. After hearing the legend of The Three Sisters, the students are invited to stop by anytime during the summer to see how well their corn, beans and squash are growing. *Photo by Christine Farrow/WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

At the end of the day, the students share what they've learned and what they liked best. Worms and frogs always score high.

DigIt is a fun and lively field trip involving children and the vagaries of Mother Nature. Occasionally we have to resort to Plan B, or the "now it's raining/sometimes pouring" plan, where students don white garbage bag "rain gear" and pretend to be butterfly cocoons. It's another highlight of the day!



**Above left:** Children enjoy searching for frogs and birds during a walk through the Naturescape Garden on DigIt! Day. **Above center:** In the Discovery Garden plant house, tables are set up with everything that is needed to create an art project with natural plant dyes. It's also a great energy release for Ketelina O'Brian! **Above right:** Carmen Garcia (left) and Sarah Malcomsen discover how a gentle pinch will release aroma from the leaves of scented geraniums in the Enabling Garden. *Photos by Christine Farrow/WSU Skagit County Master Gardener*