

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Gardening with Kids - By Ann Cox

HEAD:

Gardening with Kids

DEK:

For best results, keep it simple, engaging and fun

BODY:

Gardening with your kids or grandkids can be an extremely enjoyable activity, provided you stimulate them with favorite and unusual plant varieties, while giving them opportunities to be involved in all stages of the effort, from seed choices to harvest. Let the kids call some of the shots right from the beginning, so that they'll take ownership in the garden and what it produces, rather than viewing it as your private domain.

Engage kids in your initial decisions, such as what to plant and where to plant it. Do they have a favorite vegetable? Does it need special attention, such as full sun or lots of water? Does it grow on a vine like peas or beans, and need a trellis or other support? Is it a root vegetable such as carrots, radishes or beets, requiring loose soil? Help the kids research these crucial aspects so they will choose varieties that aren't likely to disappoint them.

Speaking of plant options, don't be afraid to think outside of the box. Kids love anything unusual, so consider oversized varieties (see sidebar) or unusually colored vegetables, such as blue potatoes ('All Blue'), red carrots ('Dragon'), black radishes ('Round Black Spanish') and green tomatoes ('Green Zebra').

Explain how to prepare the planting bed, then put shovels or garden forks in their hands so they can help you work the soil. Let them plant the seeds or seedlings, and water them in. As the growing season progresses, pull weeds together; make it a fun task by throwing multiple contests to see who can pull the most weeds in 10 minutes. Don't overdo it, though; keep it brief and simple.

Plant flowers amongst your vegetables if you can, and let the kids pick the flowers and decorate the table with them—a great way to let them enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Take advantage of your time in the garden with the kids. Teach them the joy of gardening by enjoying the garden with them. Have a picnic there or set up a bird feeder nearby. Go slug hunting, either in early morning or late in the evening. All you need is a bucket of soapy water and an old spoon. Scoop up the slugs and drop them in the bucket.

Encourage the kids to get up close and personal with the plants and insects that populate the garden. Help them learn to identify good insects and pests. Consider releasing ladybugs, green lacewings or praying mantises in the garden; their voracious appetites will provide entertainment and a hands-on education for the kids, while keeping populations of harmful insects in check.

Take time to explain what you are doing as you perform routine tasks in the

garden, such as caring for your tools and cleaning up after a work session. Finally, tell the kids how much you enjoy working with them and what a great job they are doing. Let them pick and pull and eat and enjoy. Remember, the family that gardens together will eat better while growing closer to each other.

SIDEBAR:

Sidebar head:

Bigger is better

Sidebar body:

Want to hook a kid on gardening? Wow them with jumbo-sized vegetable and flower varieties. Here are some options.

Tomatoes: ‘Brandywine,’ ‘Martian Giant,’ ‘Beefmaster,’ ‘Big Beef’, ‘Pik Red’—all are large, beefsteak-type varieties.

Pumpkin: ‘Dill’s Atlantic Giant’ (827-pound world-record pumpkin was this variety, grown in Puyallup in 1992).

Beans: ‘Scarlet Runner’ beans scramble up trellises quickly and produce beans pods up to 12 inches long and 1 inch wide. ‘Dow Gauk’ (“asparagus”; *Vigna sesquipedalis*) beans are thinner, but can reach 16 inches in length.

Corn: ‘Stowell’s’ can reach 10 feet in height.

Cucumber: ‘Armenian’ can measure 18 inches.

Carrot: ‘Celebration’ can reach 22 inches.

Peppers: ‘Super Heavyweight Hybrid,’ yields yellow, mild, bell peppers almost as big as a cantaloupe.

Watermelon: ‘Bush Snakeskin’ can tip the scales at 45 pounds.

Sunflowers: ‘Mammoth Greystripe’ (up to 12 feet tall), ‘Kong’ (up 14 feet tall); ‘Supermane’ boasts large, thickly petaled flower heads.

Dahlias: ‘Zorro,’ ‘Café au Lait,’ and ‘Breakout’ blossoms, as well as many other “dinnerplate” varieties, can measure 11 inches in diameter.

Gourd: ‘Snake’ looks like a long, green baseball bat—up to 3 feet long! ‘Bushel’ can measure 5 feet in circumference.

Elephant ears: Oversized plant grows up to 6 feet tall, with leaves measuring 2 feet long.



PHOTO CAPTION (Filename: Gardening with kids_photo by Jason Miller):
Leaving your zucchini on the vine will produce impressive results that kids love. Photo by Jason Miller.

References:

- Seeds of Change seed catalog, spring 2007
- Ed Hume Seeds associate Neal Miller (Jason Miller's father)
- Pinetree Garden Seeds catalog, 2007-08
- Henry Field's seed catalog, spring 2007

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.