

Gardening with Children

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Lessons for life from nature

What is your first memory of digging in the dirt? Perhaps your grandparents or neighbors had a vegetable patch where you picked beans and carrots. Did you gather wild flower bouquets from vacant lots for your mother or help your aunt in her rose garden? You might have grown up in a farm community such as the Skagit Valley where growing produce was a common way of life.

Wherever the gardening bug grabbed you, count yourself lucky. Strong garden memories last a lifetime. Now you have a chance to make memories for a new generation.

Gardening experiences not only connect children with the beauty of nature but offer lessons in science and life. While having fun, they learn new skills and develop self-confidence by caring for plants and growing their own food. They learn responsibility as well as an understanding of cause and effect, such as the fact that plants die without water, or weeds compete for food with plants so must be removed.

Botany, nutrition and simple construction can all be taught through the gardener's eye. Using all of the senses—sight, sound, smell, taste and touch—fires up young brain cells. And what a physical workout it can be!

Gardening offers the opportunity for meaningful work in connection with nature. Incorporating activities like pushing a wheelbarrow, hauling water or raking leaves work on balance as well as strength. Physical exertion often brings a calming effect in young gardeners. Studies at the University of Illinois even claim that spending time in nature, especially in green spaces, can relieve children from symptoms of ADD and ADHD. Kids are able to concentrate and pay attention better after spending time in the natural world. And don't worry about dirty hands! Kids love making mud pies, and it might even help introduce some beneficial antibodies.

Activities such as feeding food scraps to worms, turning the compost pile or collecting seeds helps children understand environmental awareness and life cycles. It teaches patience and nurturing as well as connection to the seasons. By linking growing and harvest with cooking, young people learn to expand their food choices, a key to good nutrition.

To get started, keep it simple. Garden organically if possible and keep sprays and fertilizers secured out of reach. Grow in containers if garden space is limited or have a separate spot in the garden for the kids' area. Use easy-to-handle correct tools, not the toy plastic ones. Allow children to pick their own tools, perhaps having them paint or decorate the handles to make them special.



Above Left: McKenzie Brown and Ryley Kuipers of Big Lake have gathered countless summer bouquets. They are learning how to identify wildflowers grown from seed sown in March. **Above Right:** Tynan Martin, a parent adviser, shows Max Adam how to site and secure the cross beams of a simple garden trellis for the community garden at Mt. Erie Elementary School. *Photos by Christine Farrow/WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Teach them safety rules, e.g., never leave the shovel, hoe or rake with its “working side” up, wash hands after gardening, and wear suitable clothing, hat and sunscreen. Teach garden etiquette. Even young children can be taught to step in the pathways and not on the plants.

Encourage garden clean up at day’s end and show how to clean and store tools properly. Give reasonable instructions, but don’t be too particular. Loosen up! If your child prefers his/her own form of block seeding rather than straight lines in the garden, go with it. Don’t cry over spilled seed. Help your child to learn from mistakes. Celebrate wonder!

But how do you pry your children away from the television or computer to join in the gardening experience? Make it fun! Grow something they like—strawberries or something unusual like artichokes. Children love bright colors so pick 3 – 5 appropriate flower packs and allow them to choose which to plant.

Root crops are always magical and there is nothing like going on a potato treasure hunt to get young ones excited. Larger seeds like peas, beans and corn are good for small children, because they are easy to handle and fast growing. Build a sunflower house by planting seeds in a square for a room, and leave a space for an entranceway. Or plant a bean teepee.

A pizza garden is a wonderful way to show a variety of vegetables and herbs growing together. Culminate the experience with a pizza baking party.

Bring out the art supplies or camera and sketch or photograph favorite plants or creatures. Invite your children’s friends over for a bulb planting party where the participants take a potted plant home with them and watch as blooms miraculously appear. Have contests such as seeing who can pick the most weeds in five minutes or who can spot the first three bumblebees. Many project and activity ideas are available in books, magazines and on the web. Visit your local library or check online for more ideas.



Gardens are full of fun and enjoyment and offer numerous ways to build character, develop confidence and increase strength. Gardening with children builds family bonds. The lessons children take away from gardening establish how they will think about food, life and nature the rest of their lives.

Left: Parker Mong, Kaeleon Thompson and Karl Poeler work together with Master Gardener Deborah Martin to decide on the placement of special native plants in the pollinator garden.
Photo by Christine Farrow / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.

RESOURCES:

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