

Gardening with Kids

Is there a little person in your life who might enjoy gardening? Working with plants isn't just fun – children can learn all kinds of lessons in the garden including science, botany, math, entomology, spelling, physical fitness, creativity and more! Try the following tips to encourage your little green thumb to get growing:

Keep it Age Appropriate

One surefire way to dampen a child's interest in gardening is to start with a project that is too easy or too complex. Let age be your guide. Preschoolers might be happiest simply digging in the dirt and filling up flowerpots while a grade school child can tackle planting and caring for seeds, with a little help. Pre-teens and teens may want to take it even further, managing their own garden space or taking on some garden chores, such as pulling weeds or mowing the lawn, for pocket money.



Choose Kid-Friendly Plants

When planning a child's gardening project, remember to choose plants that grow quickly and are easy to care for. For seed planting projects look for larger types that are easy to handle and sprout rapidly. Sunflowers, beans or pumpkins are a few options. Because children can be forgetful about maintenance, make sure you choose plants that can take a little neglect or live through a missed watering. Does the child have a favorite food, such as strawberries, that you can grow? Gardening can even create a taste for new treats. A picky eater may surprise you by eagerly eating beans or peas from "their" plant, when they wouldn't touch them otherwise!

Give Them Their Own Tools

Inspire the little gardener with a pint-sized set of tools. They'll not only be easier for him or her to handle, your own expensive tools won't get lost or left in the rain, at least by the kids! Some helpful basics include a small wheelbarrow or wagon, a watering can, a shovel, a rake, and a pair of gardening gloves.

Make Space

Help children feel comfortable to experiment by giving them their own garden space. It could be a small corner of the vegetable patch, a miniature flowerbed or even a simple container on the porch where they can dig, pull, plant and water to their heart's content – without disturbing your prize dahlias. Help projects go smoothly by setting up supplies in advance. Gather soil, pots, seeds, water and tools together, and then let the little gardeners know it's time to dive in!

Start a Bug Patrol

Some children are more fascinated by what's crawling on your plants than the plants themselves! If this is the case, help children spot and identify the bugs in your garden. Look them up together in a book or on the Internet to learn more about them. Teach children the difference between beneficial creatures, such as lady beetles, earthworms, bees, and praying mantis, and pests, such as slugs and aphids. Speaking of slugs, why not start a slug patrol and let adventurous children gather them up for you for a few cents apiece?



Seize the Learning Experience

Gardeners can learn as much about gardening from what goes wrong as from what goes right. If a project fails, help the child figure out why. Was the plant exposed to the wrong conditions? Did it need more water? Are pests to blame? Play up the learning aspect of projects by encouraging children to track the progress of a plant on a chart, draw pictures of it, write plant names out on garden labels, or other tasks to expand on the experience.

Keep Interest Sparked

Most seeds and plants grow slowly. It will likely be up to you to keep the momentum going. Rekindle a child's interest by pointing out when a seed has sprouted or by helping him or her measure how much a plant has grown that week. Remind them when it's time to water, trim or pick fruits, flowers or vegetables. Keep it fun! Avoid forcing a child to maintain their garden or making it a chore. If a child isn't enjoying a project, try something else.

Play it Safe

Remember to keep the gardening experience safe by storing sharp tools and hazardous chemicals out of a child's reach. Teach children to pick up heavier objects by bending at the knee instead of straining their backs. Go over the basics of safely transporting a full wheelbarrow or wagon. Show children which plants and berries are edible – and which are not.

Before you know it, you'll have an eager gardening companion to share your love of plants with. Enjoy!

Sunflower Garden Project

With just a few inexpensive supplies, your child can create a garden filled with fast growing, glorious sunflowers.

Supplies

Potting soil

Paper or plastic cups or 4-inch pots

Shallow dish or container

Package of sunflower seed, any variety

Water

If using cups, poke a drainage hole in the bottom of each. Fill cups or pots with soil to ½ inch from the rim. Poke two or three seeds into each container just below the soil surface. Do not plant too deeply. Place pots in shallow container near a sunny window. Fill shallow container with water, which will wick up into the soil to water the plant via capillary action. Check water level every other day and replenish as needed. Seeds should sprout in 7-10 days. Plant out in the garden when seedlings reach 3-5 inches tall. Keep watered and weeded. When sunflowers are finished blooming, seed heads can be removed and left in a warm, dry place to dry. Hang dried seed heads around the yard to create natural birdfeeders for winter.