



Getting Down and Dirty: Gardening with Children

by Brenda S. Metzler



Why garden with children? Why not? There are countless benefits and rewards, and every one of the five senses can be actively involved. Let's talk about the how and why of engaging even the youngest children in planting and nurturing a garden.

When you want to garden with children it's a good idea to start with a plan. Children are easily included in deciding what to plant, choosing among favored and familiar foods and flowers or by looking at pictures in catalogs or on seed packets. In *Garden Crafts for Kids*, author Diane Rhoades lists her own simple rules for deciding what to grow: "I plant what I like to eat. I plant what I like to smell. I plant what I like to look at." It's particularly fun to browse the web, gardening catalogs and racks of seed packets when winter lingers, allowing your imagination to grow a little of everything! When you're finished with the catalogs, you and your child can cut them up and create a colorful collage to brighten your wall and your spirits.

To get started, think about what will work for your situation – light, space, growing season. A bit of planning can also help you to avoid growing or buying too many plants, and to stay on budget. Seeds or plants may be bought, traded with friends or collected from their plant source. Consider the tools you have at hand. They may be as simple as hands or sand toys; borrow if you need more, or buy and share with friends and neighbors.

If you're privileged to have outdoor space for gardening, use it! You can go as fancy or as simple as you want here, but in the end, you really only need a few basics to get the job done – seeds or plants, digging tools, soil, water and sunlight. If you don't have garden space, fill containers with soil and water them regularly. Container gardens can be moved to accommodate light needs. If you start plants inside you can make use of yogurt cups, old egg cartons, disposable drinking cups and the like. Children can spoon in a little potting soil and write or copy the name of the plant onto a popsicle stick. Watering the plants can be a very fun part of gardening for children, especially if they are permitted to get wet! Even young children can carry cups or pails, small pitchers or watering cans, or hold a hose.

Not all soil is created equal, so yours may need a bit of horse manure or other compost in addition to loosening up. Preparing the soil can also be a fun learning experience. Put on your old clothes, get on your knees with the children and turn over the soil with your spade or trowel. And use your hands. Squeeze some dirt between your fingers, smell it, notice the things living there – worms, spiders and insects. Note how each has a place in that habitat. If your child is shy about creepy crawlers, you can help them get past the "ick" factor with a few interesting facts. Worms work WONDERS for the soil, aerating and fertilizing. Spiders help with pest control. And even tomato horn worms create beautiful moths!

Once you've started seeds, there's the thrill of waiting for them to sprout and watching them grow. Plants are living things, and their life cycles can be educational as well as fascinating. Children of all ages can see the progression of a plant from tiny seed to mature plant yielding flowers and fruit. The whole experience invites questions and discovery. What purpose do roots serve? Why are leaves important? Where do seeds come from? Why are avocado seeds so big and carrot seeds so tiny?

Keeping on top of weeds can be a challenge, but it can also be fun when made routine. Every time you visit your

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garden, pull a few weeds. Think of it as a gift to your plants! They can breathe better. They can grow bigger and stronger. They can produce more food or flowers for you to enjoy. And children are learning to care for a living thing.

It's great fun to plant things that children can safely and easily access for themselves. Plant flowers that may be picked. Grow pole beans on a yarn trellis fastened to your porch or deck. Make a bean house. Sow carrots. Show children when and how to harvest edibles.

Mmm...there's nothing like eating the fruits of your labor! Children (and adults) LOVE harvesting things they've planted and nurtured. Many, many times I've witnessed kids falling in love with freshly picked vegetables, still warm from the sun, that they previously thought they didn't like.

Most importantly – HAVE FUN!

A general list of toxic and non-toxic plants is available at www.the-family-place.org along with a lightly-reviewed list of children's literature and how-to books on gardening with children.

Here are a few sensory invitations:

Taste -- nasturtiums, carrots, blueberries, mint -- everything from fruits and vegetables to flowers and herbs

Smell -- herbs (parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme, mint, oregano, basil, etc) nasturtiums, lavender, dirt

Touch -- water, dirt, roots, seeds, leaves, flowers

See -- flowers with "faces" - pansies, snapdragons, colors, shapes

Hear -- dry leaves crumbling, weed roots being released by the dirt, plants rustling in the wind, plant texture, food texture

Some educational extensions to get you started:

Art – seed/plant catalog collage (go online or call for free seed and plant nursery catalogs), gather/press/dry flowers and plants, notice colors, shapes, textures, use plant parts for making prints with paint, non-toxic seed mosaics

Language Arts – stories, books, label plants with pictures or words, preschoolers can copy plant names from seed packets, introduction to new words - plant names and gardening terms

Math – measure/mark growth, simply note "bigger", sort beans and other seeds by color or size

Music – songs, rhythms, singing to your plants (to encourage them to grow, of course!)

Science – growth cycles - seed to sprout to plant to seed, predict, observe, notice with children (even one-year olds notice changes), record



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