



Gardening with Children

Children learn from watching and doing, so explain what you're doing and why. Keep it simple and involve them in the work and encourage them to not only look, but to touch and smell and to appreciate all the different forms of life in your garden.

Leave your adult notions of gardening success aside. For children, it is the process, not necessarily the product that is important.

If many members bring their children to the community garden, it may make sense to have a special children's area, with smaller plots, where they can do what they want. If this is not possible set aside a small area of your own plot.

Base the plot's size on the length of the child's reach: it should be no wider than twice a comfortable reach, provided the plot is accessible on both sides. Edge the plot with bricks or small stones to define the boundaries of the plot and help the child to feel that it is his or her own.

Lay down boards, stepping stones, or have a grass or bark path so that it is very clear where it is okay to walk.

TOOLS AND RULES

- Teach your child that tools are not toys and can inadvertently hurt someone if they are not used carefully.
- Teach your child to use the appropriate tool for the task (i.e. don't dig with a rake or try to rake with a spade).
- Teach your child to clean all the tools when finished.
- Never leave tools in the garden over night. Have a special place to keep your tools.
- Most adult sized tools, with the exception of trowels, are too big or heavy for children to use comfortably. Many garden tools come in child sized version and can be an acceptable substitute.
- Stay away from plastic tools designed for sandbox play. They are too flimsy for gardening and don't often look like the real thing.
- Teach your child basic community gardening etiquette: Don't walk in anyone else's garden, unless invited and don't pick anyone else's plants, unless invited.
- Teach your child to observe essential safety rules: Never taste any parts of any plant unless an adult says that it is safe to do so. Teach them to recognise poison ivy, stinging nettles and any other poisonous plant. Don't touch fertilisers, pesticide containers, or brightly coloured seeds (these have been chemically treated).

THE GARDEN

Soil Preparation: Depending on the child's age, you may have to do a lot of the initial soil preparation for them, especially in the first year. But, every child likes to dig, so let them dig and break up clods of dirt with hand tools so that they feel they have prepared their own garden bed.

Seeds: Look through seed catalogues with your child and guide them toward choosing fast growing, tougher than usual plants that can stand over or under watering such as radishes, beans, peas, nasturtiums, onions and sunflowers. Make suggestions, but let your child make the choice.

Planting: show your child how to plant by starting with large seeds like beans, peas or sunflowers. Clearly mark out a furrow where seeds are to go and help place the seeds in the bottom and firmly cover with soil. As your child becomes more experienced, move on to medium sized seeds (radish and spinach) and let them measure and mark the row themselves.

Watering: Stress the importance of water to growing plants and that without careful and regular watering, the seeds won't grow into plants. If your child is too small to carry a watering can, give them a glass to water some or all of their plants.

Observing: Once the plants are up and growing, encourage your child to observe the changes to their plants as well as the growth of "unintentional" plants (weeds). Also have your child observe the soil, bugs, animals and other life in the garden.

Harvesting: The best way for a child to learn about where their food comes from, is from harvesting and eating the food they have grown in their garden. Supply your child with a basket, a hose and bucket for washing off the dirt and have them carefully pick their vegetables!