



Grow a Child Friendly Garden

Gardeners love to share their interest in gardening, and sharing with children is particularly rewarding. Even 2 and 3 year-olds can help plant their own little patch and watch as life unfolds in it, and 5 to 10-year-olds bring wonderful enthusiasm for outdoor fun. Winter is a great time to plan next spring's gardening adventure. Snuggle up with seed catalogs or look at photos on favorite packet seed companies' websites to explore what would be fun to grow next season. Here are some suggestions for making gardening enjoyable – and safe – for young children.



Start with child-size tools and materials. Invest in a sturdy, child-sized trowel that will make it easy for youngsters to work in the garden, and don't forget a watering can small enough for children to lift themselves. A colorful pair of kid's garden gloves may be helpful for a child who is a little squeamish about bugs and worms.

Stake a claim. Section off a corner of the garden or yard where children can do as they please. It doesn't have to be designed or even particularly attractive, just a place where kids can explore without risk of damaging your prized plants.



Let children choose what they'd like to grow. Most often these will be plants they recognize, like pumpkins. Plants with large seeds, such as beans, squash, peas, sunflowers, or nasturtiums, are easy for small hands to handle. Although radish seeds are smaller, children delight in their almost instant growth and harvest. Or plant with a theme, perhaps a "pizza" garden containing tomatoes and peppers as well as herbs such as basil and oregano.



Create a special garden spot. Consider constructing a tepee from tall poles and twine, to be covered with climbing beans and flowers. (Be sure to leave an opening for a door.) Or create a special room: a circle of tall sunflowers with shorter sunflowers or other flowers between them.

Grow plants with interesting scents. Chives, sage, mint, lavender and basil are good choices for a child's garden. Edible flowers like nasturtiums, pansies and calendulas, or blossoms from beans and peas are also fun to add to sandwiches or salads or to decorate the tops of cupcakes and cookies.

Teach children about beneficial insects. A great way to introduce your kids to the idea of the interconnectedness of the natural world is to learn together to identify and nurture beneficials, the garden “good guys,” and to work on projects that make your garden a more inviting place to these helpful insects.

Beneficial insects, like butterflies and lady bugs, are ones that behave in ways that are helpful to plants, either by pollinating flowers or preying on insect pests. Encourage them by planting lots of flowers and herbs that attract them, especially ones with umbrella-shaped clusters of small flowers, such as dill, caraway, butterfly flowers, lavender, yarrow and daisy-like flowers such as cosmos, zinnias, sunflowers and black-eyed susan (a.k.a. rudbeckia) . Help your child to place some groups of flat rocks in the garden to give pest-eating ground beetles a place to shelter.

Teach garden safety. Since many other plants – even something as familiar as rhubarb leaves – are toxic, teach children never to put anything from the garden into their mouths without checking with an adult first.

Make gardening fun, not work. Offer encouragement and how-to, but go easy on detailed advice. If children see you working in the garden, they will want to imitate what you do in their own spot – the best way to learn. (Kids particularly enjoy watering their growing plants and don't consider it a chore!) Don't worry if a child's garden seems messy or weedy – little ones love the thrill of seeing seedlings emerging from seeds poked into the ground, even if their garden spot is not particularly tidy.



The excitement of picking the first ripe cherry tomato, snow pea or green bean and the pride of presenting the family with a bouquet straight from the garden, or the fun of carving a homegrown pumpkin for Halloween may well turn a young gardener into a gardener for life!

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