



Grow a Garden with Your Toddler

Even before his or her second birthday, your toddler can interact with, be inspired by, and make discoveries in the garden. All it takes is a patch of dirt, a few seeds, and some patience, and before long you'll find a gardener growing alongside your tomatoes. Here are some ideas for getting started.

Materials List

- A tilled garden site or a large container filled with sterilized potting soil
- Seeds for easy to grow plants (e.g., radishes, peas, beans, cherry tomatoes, carrots, pumpkins, and sunflowers)
- Lightweight tools suited to small hands
- Small watering can or spray bottle



Inspiring Ideas

Check out some garden-related picture books from the library and read them with your toddler. (See recommendations in the "Tips" section below.) After reading a few, ask her what she might like to plant in her garden this spring. Have ready a selection of seed packets (including those from the books you've read) for her to investigate and choose from.

Hunt and Gather

If you plan to start seeds indoors, go on a scavenger hunt with your toddler to search for fun containers you can use. Most will work, as long as they're at least 2 to 3 inches deep and have drainage holes. Some examples include: cardboard egg cartons, empty yogurt containers, and pots made out of newspaper.



The Right Stuff

Provide your toddler with tools they can safely use. If you don't want to buy kid's tools, adult hand tools will work. Teach him how to use the tools properly and be clear about which tools are okay for him to use.

Demonstrate how to sow seeds or plant starts and then let him do it.

Remind him you are there to help if it is needed, but otherwise try not to intervene. Using a small watering can or spray bottle, your toddler can water their seeds and plants. Be prepared though, the only thing better than digging in the dirt is splashing in the mud!

Picture Perfect

Have your toddler help you create plant labels with pictures to help your pre-reader remember what's growing where in the garden.

Peek-a-Boo

Visit the garden together as much as possible and take time to stop and look. Pick up insects. Catch a worm or watch it wriggle. Peek through the leaves for produce. Count the tomatoes. Pull a weed or two.

Ready or Not, Here I Come!

Toddlers live in the here and now. Cultivating patience can be challenging. Help your young one identify ripe radishes, seasoned snow and plump pumpkins by cutting out magazine clips of ripe produce. these onto index cards or create a little book so your little one can consult and compare before picking. This won't eliminate the need to hastily picked green tomatoes on your windowsill, but have heart, there's more where these came from. One of the best rewards of gardening is eating produce right from the plant. Allow toddlers to munch freely on produce that's growing aboveground, but be sure to carefully wash any root vegetables before eating.



peas,
Glue
ripen

Yummy in My Tummy

Following a plant from seed to table is not only satisfying, it sets the stage for a lifetime of healthy eating. Invite your toddler to help you wash tomatoes before adding them to a salad or to sprinkle fresh basil onto pasta. For recipe suggestions check out Pretend Soup, a cookbook for preschool-age children by Mollie Katzen.

Tips

- Use organic methods for fertilizing and pest control when gardening with young children.
- Prevent cats and dogs from using your garden as a toilet.
- Remove poisonous plants, including poison ivy and plants with toxic berries, from your vegetable garden area.
- Teach your toddler never to pick from plants without your permission.
- If you live in an urban area, have your soil checked for lead and other toxic substances before starting a garden. Contact your state Cooperative Extension office to find out how to get your soil tested.
- Wash your hands and your toddler's after digging in the dirt. Cover cuts or scrapes with band-aids before working in the garden.

Good Garden Reading

Growing Vegetable Soup by Lois Ehlert
Pumpkin Pumpkin by Jeanne Titherington
Tops and Bottoms by Janet Stevens
This is the Sunflower by Lola M. Schaefer
Whose Garden Is It? by Mary Ann Hoberman

The Carrot Seed by Ruth Krauss
The Tiny Seed by Eric Carle
Oliver's Vegetables by Vivian French
Stone Soup by Marcia Brown
Alison's Zinnia by Anita Lobel