

# GARDENING WITH CHILDREN



## Sharing the experience of gardening with children provides benefits for both grown-ups and youngsters.

Introducing kids to gardening works best if you find ways to make it fun and relaxing for both of you. That starts with focusing on the process rather than the results. You also want to engage children's interests with projects that capture their attention. Here are some ideas to get you started.

### WHY GARDEN WITH KIDS

Before we dig into ways to help kids enjoy gardening, let's go through a few of the most compelling reasons to make time for it.

**Outdoor fun.** Kids spend a lot of their days sitting in front of screens. Gardening gets them outside in the fresh air and sunshine, moving around and letting their natural curiosity guide them.

**Eating healthy.** Many studies have shown that children who help to grow and pick fresh vegetables and fruits are much more likely to eat them.

**Sensory exploration.** Gardens bring kids up close to a wide range of sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and textures. When kids wander around and among plants, they discover the power of their senses to help them experience the world around them.

**Real world science and math.** Classroom subjects come to life when they're applied in the garden. Preparing and planting a bed teaches lessons about measuring and other math skills. Key concepts of biology, chemistry, and physics become clear with tangible examples from plants and their growth cycles.

**Building responsibility.** Kids who make a commitment to care for plants learn why it's important to follow through on their obligations.

**Skill development.** A first-hand experience of nature inspires young people to pay attention to how their choices affect other living things and fosters respect for the environment. They will become the protectors of the planet as they grow up.

**Lifetime gardeners.** Kids who grow up digging in the dirt and tending plants are likely to be gardeners when they are older, so they'll enjoy the benefits of good health and happiness all through their lives.

### WHAT TO DO

Young children are often eager to join in with whatever you're doing in the garden. Let them help with easy tasks like digging holes for seeds and planting them, watering, and harvesting. Don't worry if the rows aren't straight or spaced evenly. Allow kids to get dirty and wet. Whatever they're doing, remember that you want to make it fun for them, not hard labor.

You can designate defined areas of the garden where the kids can plant what they want and how they want. You can also try these fun projects with them.

**Friendship Fort.** Insert sturdy bamboo poles into the ground in a circle large enough for two or three children to sit in the center. Leave enough room between one pair of poles for a small person to crawl in. Gently pull the poles together at the top and tie them with twine, enclosing the interior. Plant pole or scarlet runner bean seeds at the base of each pole. Keep the beans watered as they grow and in a few short weeks the kids will have a secret hideaway surrounded by vines.



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**Theme Beds.** Let the kids choose a plan for a garden bed. A rainbow garden, for instance, would include plants that represent each of the colors, such as red peppers, orange carrots, yellow squash, green lettuce, and purple eggplant. Maybe they'd prefer a pizza garden where the crops are organized in a circle with different wedges for each ingredient, such as tomatoes, onions, oregano, and a grain like wheat or oats. Plant a flower-filled butterfly garden and they'll watch in awe as the winged wonders stop by for nectar.

**Container Life.** A large flowerpot can turn into a home for toy people, animals, and vehicles. Ask the kids to build a small house with plastic blocks and place it in a container full of potting soil. Surround the building with a few plants, then have the kids position the toys so they're interacting with each other and the plants. The scene can stay the same all season or change as often as the kids like.

**Kitchen Scrap Revival.** The parts of plants that get thrown away can be restarted and then planted in the garden. The bottom of celery stalks, sprouting potatoes and sweet potatoes, carrot tops, and many other kitchen scraps are easy to regenerate in a dish or glass of water on a sunny windowsill. Once new roots appear, you can move the plants into outdoor beds.

**Seed Bombs.** Give the kids clay from craft stores and dampened potting soil, along with fast-germinating seeds like radishes and wildflowers. After they mix the three ingredients thoroughly, they can form firm balls with their hands. Allow the balls to dry out, then let the kids toss them where you want them to grow or share them with friends.

**Scavenger Hunt.** Give children a list of things to find in and around the garden, including leaves and stems, different colored flowers, seeds and seed pods, crawling insects and flying insects, and more. Let them use a cell phone camera to snap pictures of their discoveries. Each child who completes the list gets a prize along with a deeper awareness of the world outside their door.

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