

THE LITTLE GARDENER



Growing your kids through gardening

One of my favourite childhood memories was running around the garden until dinner time, chasing after lightning bugs and catching tadpoles. Sadly, too many kids spend most of their summer time indoors, playing on video games or watching TV.

This lack of contact with nature can negatively affect these children's health, well being and academic performance, say experts. Here are five reasons why kids should garden instead...



Five reasons why kids should garden!

- 1) Prevents Nature Deficit Disorder: With so many kids spending time away from nature, we're seeing evidence of a "nature deficit disorder" in many children. This disconnect from nature is leading some kids to become overweight, anxious and depressed. Plus, this nature deficit disorder is affecting children's performance in school too. More about nature deficit disorder. To make sure this doesn't happen to your kids, be sure to unplug the electronic gadgets regularly, and involve your family more in the garden.
- 2) Teaches About Nature ... and More: Maybe it's growing a sunflower from seed. Or, building a bean teepee in the backyard. But when you involve kids in gardening, they learn hands-on skills that broaden their awareness of the world around them. They learn why butterflies and bees help pollinate plants. And why the right amounts of water and sun are needed to get gardens to grow. Along with a greater appreciation for nature, gardens can also teach kids about biology, math, history, nutrition and more.
- 3) Gives Them Exercise: Gardening provides lots of healthy ways for kids to stay active and healthy. Between digging, raking and planting, your children will get plenty of exercise, vitamin D and fresh air. Be sure to make your garden chores creative, and mix them up a bit so they stay interesting. With a little patience, you'll find your children will become helpful and fun assistants in the garden.
- 4) Encourages Kids To Eat Vegetable and Fruit: Ask any parent with a vegetable garden. The kids that grow up around homegrown vegetables are much more likely to eat them too. Maybe it's because kids enjoy picking fresh beans or tomatoes. Or perhaps it's because fresh fruit and vegetables simply taste better just picked from your yard. But whatever the reason, gardening is an excellent way to help solve the problem that most children are not eating enough fresh fruit and vegetables. Try it yourself and report the results.
- 5) Prepares Them for Life: There's something magical about gardening. The tiny seeds that grow into healthy, big plants. The birds that swoop down to capture a juicy worm. The end of the growing season when the plants start to die back for winter. All these lessons can be a wonderful reminder to be patient while things grow, and to keep the faith when some things die away. Besides, as human beings our brains are wired to be out in nature. Perhaps that's why it's feels so natural to be out there.



How to teach kids to garden

1. Focus on making it fun and exciting. When children realize how many interesting, intriguing and even gross things there are to be involved in, they'll be more likely to want to get involved.

Whenever planning anything, work out the fun angle, to keep your children's interest engaged

2. Kit out your kids. A big part of the fun is having the right tools and there are many gardening tools made just for kids, in their size, and in wonderful colours. Colourful tools, while not essential, are a helpful way to encourage kids to join in. Gardening gloves for kids often come in wonderful colours and patterns too and each child should have a pair of his or her own.

- Buy a pretty watering can which suits the child's size and strength. This will encourage him or her to keep watering the growing plants.

- Show children how to clean and put away tools after use. Make this easy and fun too—a bit of splashing about should be part of the cleaning chores.

3. Choose plants that are easy to grow. While it's important to involve your children in choosing the plants, make sure that the choice is from plants likely to be as trouble-free as possible, especially for beginner gardeners. Also choose a few plants that will produce a delicious edible harvest for your children to pick and take straight to the table from the garden. Some good starter choices include:

- Sunflowers

- Radishes

- Squash

- Tomatoes (from seedlings)

- Lettuces

- Peas and beans

- Sweet peas, poppies, alyssum, marigolds, pansies or nasturtiums.

4. Show your children the basics of planting seeds and seedlings in the ground. Do the hard work of tilling the soil and adding the nutrients for them—they can learn about that later. For now, give them the joy of planting, watering and waiting for their little plants to sprout.

- For very small hands, make the job even easier by planting the seeds in cardboard egg cartons.

When it comes time to transfer the seedling (or the seed) to the soil, cut out each little egg holding portion and let your kids plant the whole thing into the ground. The carton will disintegrate and no seeds or seedlings get lost in the transition.

5. Include wildlife in your child's gardening experience. Add a birdbath, bird feeder and feeders for any furry wildlife such as squirrels, hedgehogs, possums, or whatever it's okay to attract to your



yard. If you have space, include a small pond for fish. Children will love the experience of seeing animals in the garden.

- Tell children which animals should not be attracted to your garden! Help them to understand the beneficial role of animals in gardening, as well as pest problems.
- If you have a large garden, you might include more pets, such as a rabbit or guinea pig enclosure, a goat or sheep, etc.

6. Show children how to grow plants from cuttings. This will amaze them endlessly, to see how you can take a cutting and get a new plant. Try plants that take easily to begin with, such as succulents, begonias, pelargoniums and bromeliads. They can experiment with harder ones as they become more experienced.

7. Make things for the garden. Get crafty with the kids and recycle, repurpose and remake things that can serve as decorations or tools in the garden. There are lots of possibilities, including: • Turning an old tire into a garden bed or plant protector

- Making herb or plant markers from iced confectionery sticks
- Painting a planter or flowerpot container in bright colours and designs. Be sure to say how pretty their own flowers would look inside it.
- Make a scarecrow to frighten away the birds; or make bird frighteners using old CDs, bits of unwanted foil and clothing, etc.
- Make a dangling decoration from shells, beads and pebbles, using thread or fishing line.
- Turn coconut shell halves into seedling pots—clean the inside, paint the outside like a face and anything that sprouts will seem like hair.
- Make a bird feeder
- Design a garden plan.

8. Decorate the garden with your kids' art and craft efforts. After you've made the objects, or purchased some at the garden centre with your kids' agreement, have the kids decide where they'd like the garden decorations to go. Encourage continued decorating projects, including removal of decorations that have become a little worse for wear over time.

9. Talk to your kids about the importance of native vegetation in gardens. Explain that while it's fun to grow flowers and veggies, care needs to be taken to prevent non-native plants from escaping the garden and invading the local environment. Show them how to control weeds and how to keep strong growing plants under control. Explain to them why you cannot grow some plants in the garden, such as plants that are considered to be invasive species. Encourage them to learn as much as possible about native plants and how to care for these.



10. Acknowledge the place of the digital era in gardening. Kids love computers and electronic gadgets and it can be hard to get them off sometimes. However, you can make the most of their affinity for all things electronic and have them download a suitable gardening app or two, and by doing research about their garden and its plants online. Gardening calendars are another useful tool found in many online gardening sites. And as the kids get older, help them to use the internet to search for harder garden projects, like making a sundial, building a chicken coop or rigging up a solar power warming pad. Encourage the exchange of knowledge online into real achievements in the garden—this is a good lesson in ensuring that they see the computer as a tool in wider life activities.

11. Show kids how to compost. It can be a lot of fun seeing kitchen scraps turn to fertile soil in time. Make sure that they don't get rostered to do compost deliveries every day though, or they'll resent it! Share the task around. Another great way to enthuse kids about compost and fertilizer is to get a worm farm. Show them how it works, how to feed the worms and how to handle them. They'll probably start naming the worms and wanting to see them regularly.

12. Keep gardening even when the season changes. Bring the garden indoors for winter, so that your kids can still enjoy the benefits of growing plants and learn how some plants can actually thrive in an indoor environment. Good choices include a small herb garden, a windowsill planter, a terrarium built in an unwanted fish tank, or a window box.

- Another idea for an indoor growing project is to grow a bulb in a bottle. Fill a bottle with water and place a hyacinth bulb at the top. Task your kids to keep the water level topped off and to wait for roots to develop. As the roots come on, tell them to be patient for the flowers to appear. You get both a gardening lesson and a beautiful table centrepiece from the one project!

13. Keep making gardening an exciting experience and be enthusiastic about it. Gardening is an experience for life and one of the lessons it teaches children is that there is a season for everything and that it all cycles again. Learning this can be highly beneficial, especially for children prone to spending a lot of time indoors and in cars going to other indoor places.