

March 20, 2019



How to Turn Your Kid's Thumb Green
By Charlie Basham
UCCE Master Gardener of El Dorado County
(Photo on File)

What youngster can resist a parent-approved activity that involves digging in the dirt, getting wet and muddy, and handling worms? *Lots of wiggly worms!*

This kind of outdoor fun is all part of the art of gardening. For a variety of beneficial reasons, many parents are encouraging their kids to go outside and get a little dirty. It's entertaining. It's educational. And it may encourage a youngster to eat better.

The first step in getting your budding young gardener started is to set aside a patch of dirt that's reserved exclusively for them. Make it a small plot; a large one can be intimidating and discouraging. Think about planting in an existing landscaped area, like a flower bed, or in a couple of empty flower pots or containers. The garden spot can be located anywhere as long as there's soil, water and plenty of sun.

Plant the kinds of vegetables your youngster enjoys, like cherry tomatoes, strawberries, carrots -- or maybe pumpkins for Halloween. One of the sweetest rewards for their work will come this summer when they can pick a ripe strawberry or tomato right off the plant and pop it into their mouth -- after a good rinse of course!

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When planting the garden there are several simple and educational concepts you can discuss with your child. Why do plants need sunlight and water? How do soil and fertilizer affect a plant's growth? Why are bees and other flying insects good for the garden? (And all these years you thought that biology class was a waste of time!)

The marvel of watching a seed grow into a flower or vegetable can spark a young person's imagination and interest in science. In fact, one recent study showed that children who participated in gardening projects scored higher in science achievement than those who did not. Young gardeners can develop a keen sense of purpose and responsibility by taking care of their plants. It also provides an understanding of where food comes from and instills a basic awareness of the environment.

To help get you and your budding young gardener started, the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are offering a free, hand-on class, designed especially for kids ages five to 12. It comes with the bonus of encouraging youngsters to display the results of their gardening skills at this June's El Dorado County Fair.

Grow n' Show (Your Plants at the Fair) will be held on Saturday, March 30, from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. at the Master Gardener Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center, 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville. While the entire class is free, there is a \$2.00 charge for parking.

This fundamental gardening class will be taught by UCCE Master Gardeners who are experienced educators. Free plants, soil and pots will be provided. At the end of class the children will be able to take their work home to foster for the fair. The instructors will also discuss how the kids can best prepare the plants for fair competition and entry forms will be provided.

Interested students are encouraged to preregister online at: http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/El_Dorado_County_Fair/ or by calling the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County office at 530-621-5512. Office hours are Tuesday through Friday from 9:00 a.m. until noon.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512), or send us an email using the Ask a Master Gardener option on our website. Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. We also encourage you to visit us at the Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, behind Folsom Lake College, El Dorado Center. See http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information on days and hours of operation, or call us to schedule a tour. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. Master Gardeners are also on Facebook and Instagram; we hope you enjoy our postings and will share them with your friends.