

Children in the Garden: Fun for Kids, Parents, and the Young at Heart!

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Do you have a favorite memory of gardening with a parent, grandparent, or neighbor? When someone invests time with a child to garden, more than plants are cultivated: seeds are sown for life-long lessons in our natural world.

Clear benefits are that kids can get dirty, learn by doing and work outdoors to satisfy their curiosity about nature. Even better -- kids build self-esteem and a sense of responsibility through patient garden tending. Classroom lessons (math, science and agriculture) are reinforced, as well as an appreciation for environmental resources. Eating habits improve, because kids are more likely to eat what they grow. Last, gardening together provides the best gift a parent can offer: quality time with a child.

Start with a plan that considers your children's age and skill level. The very young require oversight to create early fun in the garden-- watch bugs or pull weeds. Elementary age and older youngsters can be progressively engaged in all aspects of planting, care and harvesting. One of many great Web sites with free ideas is <http://www.kidsgardening.org>.

Garden space -- big or little, a garden doesn't have to be perfect. Start small and leave room for future growth. In-ground beds, raised beds or containers work. Pick a location with six or more daily hours of sunlight, or make a shade garden. Good soil is important; consider soil testing and provide amendments if needed. Add functional and fun structures: pathways, fencing, seats, bean pole teepees and twig archways. Include personal touches with imaginative homemade garden decor like scarecrows and veggie row markers.

"Eat a rainbow every day" by growing a variety of fruits, vegetables, herbs and flowers. Try fun or fast-growing plants: pumpkins and sunflowers... tomatoes, radish, lettuce and carrots... basil, oregano and rosemary... marigolds, cosmos and zinnias. "Smelly" plants are memorable: chocolate mint or lemon balm. Themed-gardens are cool: Alphabet... Butterflies... Peter Rabbit... Native American Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash)... Salsa... Pizza... just to name a few!

Keep safety in mind. Garden chores should be done together, or with close instruction. Avoid use of pesticides; bug or plant problems can be an opportunity to research eco-friendly solutions, or call the Master Gardener office for help. Provide right-sized garden

tools that are smaller and lighter, but sturdy enough for garden tasks. Most-needed tools include a hoe, rake, digging fork, spade, hand trowel and gloves.

Enjoy the harvest! If you produce more than your family can eat, donate to our local food bank (Plant a Row for the Hungry <http://www.par.edc.org>). In the fall, clean up the garden for winter and start planning for next year's hearty crop! The beauty of gardening is just like a child -- it continues to grow and only gets better over time.

This Saturday, May 21, UCCE Master Gardeners will present a class on "Children and Gardening." The class is held in the Veterans Memorial Building at 130 Placerville Dr. in Placerville and starts at 9:00 a.m. The class is offered free of charge. Come learn about the rewards of giving kids a place to grow. In this class we will show adults and older youth how to help young children develop a love, enthusiasm, and perhaps even a lifetime hobby of gardening. We will discuss topics such as garden safety, garden tools, and creating a garden journal. You'll be introduced to many fun projects that you can teach children, such as "The Ivy Tower" and "The Pizza Patch". This class is more of a "teach-the-teacher" session for anyone who loves gardening with children; it is not a hands activity session for children. The Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Walk-ins are welcome. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Gardener/.