

Learning in the Garden – A Teacher’s Guide

Children can learn new skills, have fun, play and develop self-confidence by spending time in the garden tending plants and growing their own food. Most children enjoy being outdoors and love digging in the soil, getting dirty, creating things and watching plants grow.

Children learn from growing things

People of all ages can enjoy gardening, but children in particular will have lots of fun and gain special benefits. Gardening is educational and develops new skills including:

- Responsibility – from caring for plants
- Understanding – as they learn about cause and effect (for example, plants die without water, weeds compete with plants)
- Self-confidence – from achieving their goals and enjoying the food they have grown
- Love of nature – a chance to learn about the outdoor environment in a safe and pleasant place
- Reasoning and discovery – learning about the science of plants, animals, weather, the environment, nutrition and simple construction
- Physical activity – doing something fun and productive
- Cooperation – including shared play activity and teamwork
- Creativity – finding new and exciting ways to grow food
- Nutrition – learning about where fresh food comes from.

Getting children interested in gardening

Some suggestions to get children involved and interested in creating a garden include:

- Keep it simple.
- Give children their own garden space. (This does not have to be big. You can start with a large container or a few pots.)
- Involve older children in the planning and design of the garden.
- Use lightweight, easy-to-handle, correct-sized tools and garden equipment.
- Encourage children to dig in the dirt. (Younger children love making mud pies)

- Grow interesting plants such as sunflowers, corn, pumpkins, tomatoes and strawberries.
- Use a trellis or teepee to grow beans or sweet peas.
- Plant flowers that attract butterflies, ladybirds and other interesting insects or birds.
- Make a scarecrow.
- Install a water feature, a birdbath or a sundial.
- Set up a worm farm.
- Visit community gardens, children's farms or botanic gardens for ideas.

Child safety in the garden

To make the garden safe for children:

- Select the correct-sized tool.
- Keep sprays and fertilisers out of reach.
- Do not use chemicals. Garden organically whenever possible.
- Provide safe storage for equipment and tools.
- Secure fences and gates.
- Provide shade in summer with umbrellas or shade cloth.
- Make sure that where it's appropriate, children wear a hat, sunscreen, suitable clothing and gumboots.
- Do not leave buckets of water unattended around very young children and toddlers.

Plant selection for children

Children like large, brightly coloured flowers and vegetables that grow quickly. Plants such as sunflowers, corn and pumpkins are good examples.

You should also consider using varieties of plants that have sensory and textural qualities as well. Examples of great sensory plants include:

- Touch – woolly lamb's ear, succulents (such as aloe vera), bottlebrush species, snapdragons
- Taste – basil, strawberries, peas, rosemary, carrots, cherry tomatoes

- Smell – jasmine, sweet peas, lavender, pelargoniums, native mint bush, lemon balm
- Bright colour – daffodils, rainbow chard, marigolds, pansies, sunflowers
- Sound – corn, bamboo and grasses rustle against each other when the wind blows.

Different ages of children in the garden

Toddlers, preschoolers, primary-school-aged and older children will all have different expectations and will learn different things in the garden.

Younger children will require careful supervision during activities. Suitable tasks for younger children include watering plants, harvesting produce and planting seeds. Older children are physically capable of handling a greater variety of activities, like digging, carrying, planting, mulching and pruning.

Activities for a child in the garden

Choose activities that suit the child's age. Suggestions include:

- Watering the garden
- Digging
- Picking flowers
- Planting vegetables, fruits and flowers in the correct season
- Feeding the worms and using the 'worm tea' from the worm farm as fertiliser
- Picking vegetables and fruits when they are ready to eat
- Preparing healthy food, such as making salads and preparing school lunches
- Craft activities using harvested seeds, plants and flowers
- Composting, recycling and mulching
- Weeding
- Gathering seeds and dried flowers
- Deadheading flowers
- Preparing the soil with organic fertiliser
- Replanting and re-potting

Things to remember

- Gardening is a healthy, fun activity for children.
- Children develop new skills and learn about science and nature from growing their own food.
- There is a variety of interesting activities children can be involved in, such as planting, mulching, weeding and cooking.
- Make sure that your garden is a safe place, with suitable equipment, tools, fences, gates and paths for children to use.

Garden Themes

Kinder Garden

- Plant an ABC Garden using plants that start with each letter of alphabet
- Build raised beds in various geometrical shapes
- Plant a rainbow garden with flowers
- Use plants with large seeds that are easy for little fingers to handle, such as sunflowers, cucumbers, and squash, beans and peas
- Sunflowers grow very quickly—use them as the basis for a “measuring garden” where young ones learning to measure can practice measuring a couple of times each week.
- Each aspect of the garden can be used to learn counting : flower petals, leaves, tools, stones etc.

Kitchen Garden

- Create an edible garden using plants that the children like to eat or have never tried before
- Create a garden with vegetables for each different plant part—roots, stems, flowers, fruits, and seeds and learn about plant parts using foods we eat.
- Grow a salad garden that will be ready to harvest before school is out for the summer.
- Plant a fruit and veggie garden featuring “vegetables” such as lettuce, carrots, and spinach as well as “fruits” (anything with a seed) such as squash, cucumbers, or eggplant

Literacy/Reading Garden

- Feature garden story books to be read in the garden each week
- Use plants found in children’s literature such as “Jack and the Bean Stalk” “Peter Rabbit,” “The Ugly Vegetables,” or “Growing Vegetable Soup”
- Create a reading circle in the garden

- Have students construct nature journals to record garden development and collect seeds and pressed flowers
- Have students write stories or poems about gardening or plants in the school garden
- Read seed packets together
- Create a school garden newsletter to share with parents and the community
- Have children write stories about the garden in books that they make
- Use the garden as the context for new vocabulary words or for writing from different perspectives (their own, a bird flying overhead, a beetle on a leaf, a worm underground, etc.)

Sensory Garden

- Use plants you can feel, smell, taste, touch and hear
- Do a lesson or activity where students can use their five senses
- Use edible flowers such as pansies, nasturtiums, borages, etc.
- Have students find ways they can use their five senses in the garden and then combine this with activities and lessons in art
- Have a garden concert using musical instruments made out of garden tools, seedpods, branches, gourds, grass blades, or flower pots
- Use plants that will have winter interest (especially if you live in a cold climate) such as grasses, shrubs, and trees with colored or exfoliating bark, evergreens, and plants with seed pods that will persist into winter

Vegetable Snack Garden

- Encourage children to grow fruits and vegetables that they would like to taste, favorites as well as new items
- Incorporate nutrition lessons
- Grow a Pizza Garden that includes plant ingredients on a pizza (oregano, basil, tomatoes, rocket)
- Grow a Salsa Garden that includes plant ingredients found in salsa
- Have students keep a food journal to record what plants they eat
- Build and observe a compost bin in your school garden
- Discuss when to plant/harvest vegetables in the garden with the community
- Learn about plant life cycles

Online Resources

1. [Kidsgardening.org](http://www.kidsgardening.org)

This is an excellent site for teachers to plan activities around the garden, contains the following:

Kids Gardening Resources Tab: Lesson Plans, Books and Curricula, Gardening Activities Ideas

<http://www.kidsgardening.org/kidsgardening-resources/>

Kids Gardening Toolbox Tab: Gardening Basics, Designing a School Garden

<http://www.kidsgardening.org/kidsgardening-toolbox/>

2. [Do the Rot Thing – A teacher’s Guide to Composting Activities \(also includes insects\)](http://www.cvsmd.org/uploads/6/1/2/6/6126179/do_the_rot_thing_cvsmd1.pdf)

http://www.cvsmd.org/uploads/6/1/2/6/6126179/do_the_rot_thing_cvsmd1.pdf

3. [Fungooms.com](http://www.fungooms.com)

Online games and reading for preschool kids with a gardening or nature theme

<http://www.fungooms.com>

Activities for children of different ages including ideas for gardening activities

4. [Activities for Children & Garden Crafts](http://www.notimeforflashcards.com/2013/03/23-garden-crafts-activities-for-kids.html)

1. No Time for Flashcards

<http://www.notimeforflashcards.com/2013/03/23-garden-crafts-activities-for-kids.html>

2. Family Education

<http://www.familyeducation.com/babies-and-toddlers/activities-toddlers>

3. Birds and Bloom

<http://www.birdsandblooms.com/backyard-projects/diy-garden-projects/>

5. [Overgrow the System](http://www.overgrowthesystem.com/blog/getting-schooled-in-the-garden-how-to-start-a-school-garden)

Online Blog about Starting a School Garden

<http://www.overgrowthesystem.com/blog/getting-schooled-in-the-garden-how-to-start-a-school-garden>

6. [BBC Gardening](http://www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/basics/techniques/)

Simple tips and advice on organic growing, gardening techniques, soil,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/gardening/basics/techniques/>

7. [Harvest to Table](http://www.harvesttotable.com/)

Excellent site to troubleshoot growth problems in vegetables / fruit

<http://www.harvesttotable.com/>