



by Karen Stephens

Gardening With Children: Green Thumbs Grow Inside, Too!

In contemporary life many children live in apartment buildings or townhouses and don't have backyard access to a garden plot, but that doesn't mean they can't reap the benefits of gardening, too! Parents can just move the action indoors — the process is the same, just on a smaller scale.

For indoor gardens you'll need containers. Any container will do. Sure clay pots are great, but kids can be playful by thinking of creative containers, such as old rubber boots, plastic-lined hats, coffee cups, buckets, or play dump trucks. Anything that can hold soil can be a flower pot. Just teach kids to layer pebbles at the bottom under the soil so water drains away from plant roots. When possible, put a drainage hole in container bottoms so excess water can escape; otherwise plants drown!

Backyard soil isn't good for container planting (it often has too much clay), so buy potting soil at a local nursery or discount store. Find a bright spot for indoor plants, but avoid hot direct sunlight; plants sunburn, too! Water as needed. If soil feels damp, don't water. If it's dry, WATER!

That's it, those are the basics. Here are proven projects to let the kids dig into.

- **Homemade "ch-ch-chia" pet:** Mold a pet from one pound of modeling clay that doesn't harden, such as Plastilina. Firmly press lots of alfalfa or rye grass seeds into the clay creature wherever fur should grow. Using a spray bottle, thoroughly wet the seeded pet with water. Put a wet paper towel in a gallon-sized plastic bag. Gently place the wet pet into the bag and seal it tight. Every day spray the pet with water. Once sprouts appear, remove the pet from the bag and place in a bright spot.
- **Green-haired monster:** Fill a coffee can with potting soil. Plant grass seed on top and keep moist. Next have the kids tape construction paper around the coffee can so they can draw a monster (or funny) face on it. As grass grows it becomes green monster hair!
- **Make a mini-greenhouse.** Fill sections of an egg carton with soil. Plant marigold or alyssum seeds. Carefully wet soil using an eye dropper or clean spray bottle. Put the seeded carton into a plastic bag, seal, and put in a sunny spot. Once sprouts reach an inch, transplant them. Kids can create plant IDs by writing flower names on popcycle sticks using a permanent marker.
- **Make an ivy topiary.** Plant a couple small ivy plants in a large pot. Use a wire hanger to create a climber for the ivy. Hold the hanger upside down by the hook and bend into any shape, such as a circle, oval, or heart. Put the hook into the soil so the hanger shape stands vertical. Gently train the vine to twine around the hanger as it grows.
- **Grow a pineapple.** Twist off the stem of a fresh pineapple. Remove the lower leaves to reveal two inches of stem. Put the stem in a glass; fill with water to the bottom leaf. Maintain the water level until the glass is half-filled with strong roots. Once that happens, transplant to a pot of soil with good drainage.
- **Grow a sweet potato vine.** Poke four toothpicks around the middle of a fresh sweet potato. Let the toothpicks rest on the rim of a jar of water and submerge half the potato. Observe as roots develop and a gorgeous vine develops. You can leave it in the jar or plant it in a pot of dirt. It's prettier than many pricey houseplants!

“Parents can
move the
action
indoors —
the process
is the same,
just on a
smaller
scale.”

- **Pie pan garden.** Slice off about an inch of a carrot, turnip, and onion TOP. Place them in a pie pan filled with water. Make sure water always covers up the bottom half of the veggie tops. Put in a sunny window and the tops will grow! Transplant to a pot.
- **Create new plants by making cuttings.** Cut a stem (not just a leaf stem) from a coleus or philodendron. Keep the stem in water until roots appear, then plant.
- **Make a mini-jungle.** (A terrarium to you and me.) Line the bottom of an aquarium (or large brandy snifter or fish bowl) with pebbles. Add an inch layer of charcoal (untreated briquettes can be broken up). Add 2 to 3 inches of soil. Plant tiny plants, such as ferns, miniature African violets or orchids, periwinkle, or baby off-shoots from spider plants. When planting is finished, water plants thoroughly with a spray bottle. Tape clear plastic wrap over the top to trap moisture. (If water droplets collect on the sides, take the cover off for a few days so mold doesn't grow.) Kids can add twigs, stones, and miniature plastic jungle animals. Tip: Plant something near the glass so kids can observe roots growing underground!
- **Study root growth.** Squeeze a sponge into a clear jar. Between the jar and the sponge, poke a corn or bean seed. Add water to moisten the whole sponge. Observe!
- **Discover how plants drink.** Put a cut stalk of celery or the stem of a white carnation into a glass of colored water. Kids will be able to track the colored water up the celery stem. The carnation bloom will turn the color of its water!

Board Games for Budding Gardeners

If you can't garden for real, garden for play! The following gardening board games are available from Gardens for Growing People, PO Box 630, Point Reyes Station, CA 94956. Visit their web site at www.svn.net/growpepl or call (415) 663-9433 to check on current prices and availability.

- **The Garden Game:** A Celebration for All Seasons. For ages 8 and older. Kids learn the basics of organic gardening from planting to harvest. The illustrations on the game board and cards are lovely. Two to six players accommodated.
- **The Bug Game:** For ages 3 and older. A memory game similar to Concentration, kids learn about bugs of the garden by matching cards. A poster and interesting bug facts are provided. One to six kids can play.
- **Harvest Time Game:** For ages 3 to 7. A cooperation game that teaches kids the harvest is easier if gardeners work together. Two or more can play.
- **Scenterville Orchard:** For ages 3 and up. Kids learn to match orchard-grown fruit scents. Counting, sorting, and sequencing are put to good use. One or more can play.
- Gardening related musical cassette tapes "Earthy Tunes" and "Nature Nuts" are also available from Gardens for Growing People.

Children's Indoor Gardening Books

- *Green Thumbs: A Kid's Activity Guide to Indoor and Outdoor Gardening* by Laurie Carlson (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1995).
- *Growing Up Green: Parents and Children Gardening Together* by Alice Skelsey and Gloria Huckaby.
- *Gardening Wizardry for Kids* by L. Patricia Kite (Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Publishing, 1995).
- *The Children's Kitchen Garden: A book of gardening, cooking and learning* by Georgeanne Brennan et.al (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press)

For more gardening ideas, see Parenting Exchange column, "Children Reap a Bushel of Benefits From Outdoor Gardening" — an overview of the many things children gain by digging and planting in the dirt.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.