



by Karen Stephens

Children Reap a Bushel of Benefits From Outdoor Gardening

If you and the kids haven't started gardening together yet, it's a great family hobby to adopt. There's a garden to fit every size of back yard plot, balcony, or imagination. Plant a sun, shade, or moon garden, or how about a bird and butterfly garden? And of course, a vegetable garden is never out of style!

Working with the earth is enriching for kids — body, mind, and soul. They acquire practical knowledge, like where food comes from before it hits the grocer's shelves. Reaping the fruits of labor teaches children autonomy and self-reliance. There's nothing better than harvesting fresh veggies from the garden patch. It reminds kids we're not completely dependent on someone else for our supper.

And you know, children sometimes feel they're on the low end of the family hierarchy. So the pride in contributing yummy vegetables or a blooming centerpiece to the dinner table bolsters self esteem. The gratification they reap is its own reward. By sharing their bounty with parents and siblings they develop a sense of cooperation, loyalty, responsibility, and unity. And (dare I risk the pun?) they grow deeper family roots.

Playing around with dirt and seeds puts academic concepts to good use. There are science, math, and language skills to apply. Here are a few topics to explore: soil conditions and nutrients, sun and rain and their importance; effects of weather conditions (like the dreaded term drought); insects and pollination; food chains; size of seeds and plants and their spacing needs; plant anatomy; life cycle of plants; organic weed and pest control; and edible and inedible plants.

You can also introduce kids to water conservation by mulching to slow evaporation for better moisture retention. It cuts down on weeding and watering chores, so mulching is a nifty time-saving measure, too! And by all means, teach kids to recycle organic materials to create gardener's gold: ah, that nutrient-filled compost! (If done right, it doesn't smell or attract pests.)

Children's energy is put to constructive use as they rake, weed, till, plant, stake, cultivate, mulch, and water. It gives them great exercise. They'll get chances to put muscles to work as they hoe to break up dirt clods. And they'll learn to be gentle as they train tiny vine tendrils to wrap around stakes. If children cook what they harvest, even more learning occurs!

If you don't know how to garden, it's your chance to show kids how to learn! Invite grandparents over for a hands-on lesson; they'll love passing on their talent! If they live too far away or don't have green thumbs, head for the library for how-to gardening books. Or call your local Cooperative Extension Office for guides.

Once you acquire the know-how, dig in and work up a sweat. Then relax and let the kids experiment just for the fun of it. Children's theme gardens are very popular. For instance, let kids play with barnyard names by planting flowers such as lamb's ear, cat mint, and cockscomb. Or plant a flower bed with only girl's or boy's names. (Daisy, Queen Anne's Lace, or Black-eyed Susans for girls. Sweet

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William, Jacob's Ladder' or Johnny Jump-Ups for boys.) You can plant an alphabet garden with a plant for each letter. Or play with colors by sowing a rainbow. Four-year-old Lucas planted a butterfly garden in the shape of (what else?) a butterfly!

And who says gardens must be square? Why not plant a pizza herb garden! Just dig a round bed. Divide the bed into triangular pizza wedges and plant whatever your taste buds prefer: oregano, thyme, marjoram, basil, or other savory spices.

The resources below offer other creative ideas. As the family digs in the dirt together, you'll be building a garden; but more importantly, you'll be strengthening family ties. And you'll commune with a gracious and bountiful host, Mother Nature. May the relationships sustain you a lifetime.

P.S. And if you're curious: a moon garden is planted only with white flowers. They reflect moonbeams with a silvery sheen that enchants little night gazers as they peer from bedroom windows. Add fireflies and you'll have a storybook scene come to life!

Tips for Gardening with Children

The web site, <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/kindergarden/pnote.htm>, offers a wealth of garden activities for kids. Following are a few tips the web site lists to help kids develop a love of gardening. The list comes from the American Community Gardening Association at www.communitygarden.org/. Parents, teachers, or child care providers can put them into practice to increase children's success in the garden.

- Never tell kids something you could show them.
- Young kids have a very short attention span. Make sure that you have lots of options available so they can get started immediately and stay busy. Digging holes is one thing that seems to hold endless fascination.
- Instant gratification helps a lot. Plant radishes even if you don't like them — they come up in three or four days.
- Remember, getting dirty is an integral part of growing up.
- When giving out supplies to several kids, try to keep seeds, tools, and other equipment as similar as possible to avoid the inevitable squabbles.
- Try to add responsibility and ownership to projects. ("Quincy is in charge of the wheelbarrow today.") Try pairing up older kids with younger ones for success.

Children as Gardeners Web Sites:

- <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/kindergarden/index.html>
- www.ahs.org/hotriculture_internet_community/national_registry_of_childrens_gardens.htm

Teaching Children to Garden Book

- *Gardening with Children* by Beth Ricahrdson (Newton, CT: Tauton Press, 1998).

Children's Garden Activity Books

- *Hollyhocks and Honeybees: Garden Project for Young Children* by Sara Starbuck, Marla Olthof, and Karen Midden (St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 2002).
- *Roots, Shoots Buckets & Boots: Activities to Do in the Garden* by Sharon Lovejoy (New York: Workman Publishing, 1999).
- *In the Garden: Games, Crafts and Activities for Children* by Meg Herd (Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Publishing, 1995).
- *Sunflower Houses: Garden Discoveries for Children of All Ages* by Sharon Lovejoy (New York: Workman Publishing 2001).
- *Hollyhock Days* by Sharon Lovejoy (Loveland, CO: Interweave Press, 1994).

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*.