

Gardening Together

People who grow up on farms know that we need to look after the Earth because that's where our food comes from. If your children think that their food just comes from the store, maybe it's time to introduce them to gardening.

Children are natural gardeners. They're curious, like to learn by doing, and love to play in the dirt. In a garden, children observe the cycle of life first hand and experience the satisfaction that comes from caring for something over time. When you do it with them, you're building your relationship at the same time you're building environmental awareness.

What to plant

When you decide what to grow, remember that children will be more interested and more satisfied if they are getting good results. Choose plants that will grow relatively quickly and easily and that your children will have fun harvesting. Here are some suggestions.

Sunflowers - Plant just one or two, since they take a lot of room. Be sure to choose the type grown for food, so you can roast and eat the dried seeds in the fall.

Lettuce - If you plant leaf lettuce, after only about a month your children will have leaves they can put in their very own salad.

Radishes - Radish sprouts poke up through the earth only three to ten days after planting. They're ready to eat in three to four weeks.

Snow peas - Snow peas are a quick-growing crop, fun for kids to eat right off the vine, pod and all.

Cherry tomatoes - Buy little plants instead of starting from seeds and you'll have tomatoes in 50 to 75 days, just the right size to pop in the mouth.

Carrots and potatoes - Root vegetables teach patience since they take longer to mature and the edible part is hidden. Choose small varieties of carrots; they are easier to grow and more fun to eat. Red varieties of potatoes mature faster.

Pumpkins - If you have room, pumpkins are a must. Seeds can be dried to eat, the flesh used for pies and the pumpkin for carving at Hallowe'en.

Tips for gardening with children

Give each child his or her **own separate space**. Keep it small, very small for young kids. Set them up for success by putting their plots where they get the best soil and light.

Convert an outgrown **sandbox** to a garden bed. This gives the child continued "ownership" of a familiar space and encourages a sense of responsibility.

Let them use **real tools**. In this way you acknowledge the importance of the work they're doing. You'll find that cheap plastic gardening tools break easily and frustrate children.

Involve children **from start to finish**. Besides planting and nurturing their garden beds, be sure they pick and prepare their crop for the table, no matter how small the harvest. They will learn that gardening, as well as being fun, gives them a chance to contribute to the family's well-being.

As much as possible, **start from seeds**. Children will learn more about the growing process by caring for their sprouting seeds and nurturing the young seedling.

Depending on the age of your child, you may need to **help behind the scenes**. You may be the one to go out in the evening to pick a few slugs off the lettuce, or to move the sprinkler. They don't have to know about all the help you offer; the main thing is that they feel the plot is theirs.

If children's attention wanes, help them **build a scarecrow**. This activity still contributes to the gardening effort and adds interest to the garden scene.

When friends visit, be sure to point out the children's gardens. Take a photo of their harvest and send it to the grandparents. The **attention** you give to their work motivates children to stay involved with a project.

Other ways

If you don't have access to a garden plot, don't let that stop you. Many plants (cherry tomatoes, lettuce, radishes) can be grown in containers on a balcony. Just remember to water often. If you don't have a balcony, you can put pots on a sunny windowsill and grow parsley and chives to add to your salads.

And if you just want to observe nature with your children, pick a patch of garden in the neighbourhood, the local park or a vacant lot. Visit it together often, from early spring to late fall and spend time noticing how it has changed since you last walked by. Take pictures, compare heights, get excited when a bud has burst into bloom. Share the wonder of nature with your children and connect with the Earth that nourishes us all.

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Adapted with permission from information provided by eartheasy.com in Parksville, BC. For more details, see www.eartheasy.com.