

Grow a Child in Your Garden This Summer

The most infectious item in our gardens is our enthusiasm. I love gardening. You love gardening. Let's share this joy with the next generation of gardeners.

Look at colorful garden catalogs with your child. Visit a local garden center and explore the seed racks and plant offerings. Within reason, let the child choose seeds or plants that are easy to grow and are colorful. Peas, pole beans, nasturtiums, big and little pumpkins, gourds, and sunflowers are fun. Zinnia, marigold, and petunia plants add pizzazz to a child's garden.

While we wait for the snow to melt, children can grow some plants indoors. Johnny's Seeds catalog offers Cressida, also known as curly cress or peppergrass. Start with a disposable cup with a hole in the bottom for drainage. Fill with any good potting soil and scatter the seeds on top. Keep moist and place in a sunny spot. In ten days, the two inch plants are ready to harvest. They have a peppery taste and may be used sparingly in salads. The taste may not appeal to kids, but that is OK. Have them try what they grew. Put salad dressing on it. We do have a three bite rule in our house – three good-sized, honest bites of something new and then no more hassle. My grandchildren will probably never again try Brussels sprouts as long as they live.



Picking Tomatoes in
Grandma's Garden

Choose a small, sunny spot for the child's garden. You may want to remove weeds or lawn ahead of time. Add lots of high quality compost, well-rotted manure, Milorganite, or other slow-release fertilizer. Dig it in well. Have the child assist.

If you lack enough room, try container gardening. Dwarf tomatoes (and other determinate tomatoes) have been bred for containers and the small fruit are often sweeter than full size tomatoes. Small fruit however, like a cherry or grape tomato, does not necessarily mean a small plant. Many of these cherry or grape tomatoes are indeterminate (the vines keep getting longer throughout the season). Their vines may be very vigorous and grow to monsters over eight feet tall by season's end.

Gardening is a hands on project. Let the child play in the soil, water, and mud. I remember going fishing with Dad. I could never put the worm on the hook correctly, and Dad always did it. Maybe I was 35 or 40, when I got to do it all by myself. However, when I teach, I let the child do it, and I explain what to do. I help the child only when absolutely necessary. Let them plant. Let them water. Water is fascinating to children. Do realize that a child with a hose will result in wet plants, wet pants, and wet parents.

Put up a scarecrow. This item will probably fail miserably in scaring crows, sparrows, and squirrels, but it will attract and please children. If you do not have a child of your own available, ask a neighboring parent if you can borrow one for a while. Let them help decorate the scarecrow – the more outlandish the outfit, the better.

If you have room, create a tipi of long bamboo or thin boards. Plant pole beans or other annual vines around the poles to create a living play room for children. Sunflowers, planted in a circle or square can also become a secret room for a child. Leave an unplanted opening for the door. Serve a picnic in this secret, green play room.

Let children into your grownup garden. Show them different plants, bugs, worms, birds and the rest of the natural world. I explain the names of each plant, both in English and in Latin, and point out the differences between the varieties. Children love to pick bouquets for their parents. Once a week, my grandchildren pick whatever they want from our garden and bring a large, wonderful mass of color and smell to their parents.

Let the child eat out of the garden, but caution them to always ask you before trying anything. Some of our plants are poisonous (rhubarb leaves, delphinium, datura, gas plant, castor bean, monkshood). To be very safe, don't grow the very toxic types. For more information, check

University of California Safe and Poisonous Garden Plants

http://ucanr.edu/sites/poisonous_safe_plants/Toxic_Plants_by_common_Name_659/

Poisonous Plants University of Pennsylvania, <http://cal.vet.upenn.edu/projects/poison/common.htm>

Finally, don't forget to take plenty of pictures of children in the garden. Share these photos with them, especially during next winter's cold and snowy months.

Happy Gardening, Joe Baltrukonis