

Tips for Gardening with Children

Karen Phillips

Prepare the garden

- Pick an out-of-the-way spot that gets good sunlight. (Avoid walnut trees; their roots poison the soil.)
- Make one raised bed (8 feet long and 3 feet wide) for each group of 8 to 12 children. You do not need to plow first, as you will add soil. The added soil will kill any grass beneath.
- Include walkways between beds to avoid trampling plants.
- Get the best soil you can afford. Better soil will bring better results for you and the children.
- Fence the garden before planting anything. (Local garden or hardware stores will offer a few options for fencing.) Bury the fencing at least 8 to 10 inches to keep rabbits out.
- Provide real child-size gardening tools, not toys. You will need just a few shovels, rakes, hoes, and trowels if you have only one small group working at one time,
- Place unique garden ornaments in each bed to help each group identify its own plot.
- Give each child one square foot for a personal garden. Use tongue depressors with the children's names on them to identify the individual gardening areas.
- If there is not space for raised beds, children can also use buckets or wooden boxes filled with soil for planting.



Decide what to grow

- Discuss with children what they want to grow in the garden. One of my groups wanted to grow pizza! They planted tomatoes, onions, peppers, oregano, and basil.
- Be sure to accommodate individual tastes and preferences. One boy wanted to grow watermelon, so he did. In the end, all the children found this plant the most fascinating.

Plant and tend the crops

- Explain to children the proper way to plant different seeds. There is no law that says all plants have to grow in rows; children can scatter carrot or radish seeds in a general area. However, some, like beans, should be sown in a straight trench with a bit of space between seeds. Melons or squash need more room than other crops.
- Weed the garden at least once a week. Be sure to fertilize on a regular basis, using dry or liquid all-purpose plant food.
- Water plants on a regular schedule. Have one teacher supervise all watering so the garden gets the right amount.



Observe and harvest

- Monitor the garden regularly with the children. Radishes and beans come up quickly, while watermelon must grow on the vine before it is large enough to be picked. Observing a garden can provide lessons on topics as diverse as life cycles, the concept of change, or practice in measurement.
- Help children explore all the aspects of the garden. In addition to plants, they may find worms, butterflies, spiders, and birds in their plots.
- Help children learn the signs that indicate a fruit or vegetable is ripe. For example, watermelon should not be pulled from the vine until the color of the spot touching the ground has changed from white to yellow.
- Teach children to wash fruits and vegetables before they eat them.



Reap the rewards

- Garden with children! They will
 - connect with nature
 - do something real, with tangible results
 - work through a beginning, middle, and end
 - enjoy both process and product

The most exciting part? When children get to eat their long-awaited garden treats. What could possibly be more tempting on a hot day than fresh watermelon from the garden? The proud smiles say it all.

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For more on the many lessons preschoolers learn while gardening, read **"Picturing Good Practice. When Children Garden, Learning Grows,"** by Laura J. Colker with Karen Phillips, in the February 2008 issue of *Teaching Young Children*.

