

A Parent's Guide to Gardening with Kids



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Gardening with your children is a fun and productive way to spend time together, reconnect with nature and get some exercise. Here are some techniques that will help everyone enjoy the experience.

Benefits of Gardening With Kids

- 1.Improve your family's eating habits. Your kids will be more excited about eating fruits and vegetables that they've grown themselves. The anticipation of harvesting will make them want to try new foods.
- 2.Become more environmentally conscious. TV and the internet keep kids indoors much of the time. Working in the dirt with plants and insects is a valuable reminder about our dependence upon the natural world.
- 3.Reinforce a sense of gratitude. It's easy to forget all the effort that goes into producing the food we eat if we just order it online or pick it up at the store. Even a small venture into agriculture can increase our appreciation for the hard work involved.
- 4.Get more physically active. Sedentary lifestyles put kids at risk for becoming overweight. Planting and weeding are great ways to integrate more activity into daily routines.

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Gardening With Younger Children

1. Let kids assume ownership. Small children will need guidance and instruction but let them take a leadership role. They can help select the plants they want to grow and the tasks they like the best. Provide lots of praise and positive feedback as they gradually assume more responsibility over time.
2. Keep it simple. Break tasks down into individual steps that your child can understand. Encourage them to select plants that will be easy to grow. Most beans thrive with little care. Plus, they're nutritional powerhouses and the big seeds make them a cinch for kids to handle.
3. Provide instant gratification. Fast results will keep kids motivated. Radishes are usually ready to pick in less than three weeks. Mix in some smaller lettuce plants with the larger ones and you'll have tender salad greens in about the same time.
4. Make it educational. Use your garden to teach everything from science to poetry. You can talk about how weather affects plants and recite poems about flowers.
5. Play it safe. Children are especially vulnerable to lead poisoning, so in urban areas you may need to get your soil tested. Make it a rule that they need to ask an adult for approval before they eat any plant. Avoid dangerous chemicals and be careful with sharp tools.
6. Have fun. Encourage your kids to invite friends over to help. Unusual varieties of plants can be amusing, so shop around for fun seeds to get a crop of foot long carrots, miniature pumpkins, or purple tomatoes.

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Gardening with Tweens and Teens

1. Let older kids guide younger ones. Middle school and high school students can be great role models and instructors for small children. The interaction is inspiring and gratifying for both sides.
2. Challenge veteran gardeners to set new goals. Horticulture will become a way of life for many kids who have the benefit of early exposure. Keep it stimulating by supporting them in developing new skills.
3. Go gently with new gardeners. If your teen is new to gardening, they may feel tentative about doing anything that would make them seem different from their peers. Until there's a reality show or video game to make growing plants officially cool, tread carefully. You might want to start with herb gardens. They're easy and practical and can even be kept indoors.

Gardening with your kids will strengthen your relationship and may even help you cut down on grocery bills. Help your kids get an early start on appreciating nature's bounty and draw your family closer together with these timeless traditions.