

Gardening for children

Children can learn new skills, have fun, play and develop self-confidence by spending time in the garden tending plants and growing their own food. Most children enjoy being outdoors and love digging in the soil, getting dirty, creating things and watching plants grow.

Children learn from growing things

People of all ages can enjoy gardening but children, in particular, will have lots of fun and gain special benefits. Gardening is educational and develops new skills including:

- **Responsibility** - from caring for and tending plants.
- **Understanding** - as they learn about cause and effect (for example, plants die without water, weeds compete with plants etc).
- **Self confidence** - from achieving their goals and enjoying the food they have grown.
- **Love of nature** - a chance to learn about the outdoor environment in a safe and pleasant place.
- **Reasoning and discovery** - as they learn about science, botany, nutrition and simple construction.
- **Physical activity** - that is fun and productive.
- **Cooperation** - including shared play activity and teamwork.
- **Creativity** - finding new and exciting ways to grow food.
- **Nutrition** - learning about sources of fresh food.

How to get children interested in gardening

Try these suggestions to get children involved and interested in creating an edible garden.

- Keep it simple.
- Give children their own garden space; it does not have to be big - it can start in a large container or in a few pots.
- Involve older children in the planning and design of the garden.
- Use lightweight, easy to handle and correct size tools and garden equipment.
- Encourage children to dig in the dirt. Younger children love making mud pies.
- Grow interesting plants like sunflowers, corn, pumpkins, tomatoes and strawberries.
- Use a trellis or tepee to grow beans.
- Plant flowers that attract butterflies, ladybirds and other interesting insects or birds.
- Make a scarecrow.
- Install a water feature, birdbath or sundial.
- Set up a worm farm.
- Visit community gardens, children's farms or the botanic gardens for ideas.

Safety in the garden

Here are a few safety tips that will help make the garden safe for all children:

- Select the correct size tool.
- Keep sprays and fertilisers out of reach; garden organically whenever possible.
- Do not use chemicals.
- Provide safe equipment and tool storage.
- Secure fences and gates.
- Provide shade in summer with umbrellas or shade cloth.
- Encourage children to wear a hat, sunscreen, suitable clothing and gumboots.

- Be careful with buckets of water around very young children and toddlers.

Plant selection

An edible garden is a garden that contains flowers, herbs, seeds, berries and plants that you can eat. Children like large, brightly coloured flowers and vegetables that grow quickly. Plants like sunflowers, corn and pumpkins are suitable. You should also consider using varieties of plants that have sensory and textural qualities as well. Sensory plants are plants that have special smell, taste, touch and sight qualities.

Different ages in the garden

Toddlers, preschool, primary school aged and older children will all have different expectations and learning experiences from exposure to an edible garden. Younger children will require careful supervision during activities. Older children are physically capable of handling a variety of activities including lifting, carrying, mulching and pruning.

Activities in the garden

Choose activities that suit the child's age. Suggestions include:

- Preparing the soil with organic fertiliser
- Planting vegetables, fruits and flowers in the correct season
- Watering the garden
- Weeding
- Gathering seeds and dried flowers
- Deadheading flowers
- Replanting and re-potting
- Composting, recycling and mulching
- Using the worms from the worm farm
- Craft activities from harvested seeds, plants and flowers
- Picking vegetables and fruits when they are ready to eat
- Preparing food
- Healthy cooking, making salads and preparing school lunches.

Where to get help

- Community or local garden groups
- Local council
- Cultivating Community Tel. (03) 9429 3084
- Horticultural Therapy Association of Victoria Tel. (03) 9836 1128

Things to remember

- Gardening is a healthy, fun activity for children.
- Children develop new skills and learn about science and nature from growing their own food.
- There is a variety of interesting activities they can be involved in, like planting, mulching, weeding and cooking.
- Make sure that your edible garden is a safe place with suitable equipment, tools, fences, gates and paths.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Horticultural Therapy Association Vic.

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