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## Gardening for children

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### Summary

- 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 children can be involved in, such as planting, mulching, weeding and cooking.
  - Make sure that your garden is a safe place, with suitable equipment, tools, fences, gates and paths for children to use.
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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 plants
- Understanding – as they learn about cause and effect (for example, plants die without water, weeds compete with plants)
- 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 – learning about the science of plants, animals, weather, the environment, nutrition and simple construction
- Physical activity – doing something fun and productive
- Cooperation – including shared play activity and teamwork
- Creativity – finding new and exciting ways to grow food
- Nutrition – learning about where fresh food comes from.

### Getting children interested in gardening

Some suggestions to get children involved and interested in creating a garden include:

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

To make the garden safe for children:

- Select the correct-sized tool.
- Keep sprays and fertilisers out of reach.
- Do not use chemicals. Garden organically whenever possible.
- Provide safe storage for equipment and tools.
- Secure fences and gates.
- Provide shade in summer with umbrellas or shade cloth.
- Make sure that where it's appropriate, children wear a hat, sunscreen, suitable clothing and gumboots.
- Do not leave buckets of water unattended around very young children and toddlers.

## **Plant selection for children**

Children like large, brightly coloured flowers and vegetables that grow quickly. Plants such as sunflowers, corn and pumpkins are good examples.

You should also consider using varieties of plants that have sensory and textural qualities as well. Examples of great sensory plants include:

- Touch – woolly lamb's ear, succulents (such as aloe vera), bottlebrush species, snapdragons
- Taste – basil, strawberries, peas, rosemary, carrots, cherry tomatoes
- Smell – jasmine, sweet peas, lavender, pelargoniums, native mint bush, lemon balm
- Bright colour – daffodils, rainbow chard, marigolds, pansies, sunflowers
- Sound – corn, bamboo and grasses rustle against each other when the wind blows.

## **Different-aged children in the garden**

Toddlers, preschoolers, primary-school-aged and older children will all have different expectations and will learn different things in the garden.

Younger children will require careful supervision during activities. Suitable tasks for younger children include watering plants, harvesting produce and planting seeds. Older children are physically capable of handling a greater variety of activities, like digging, carrying, planting, mulching and pruning.

## **Activities for a child in the garden**

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

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

## Where to get help

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

## Things to remember

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

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Horticultural Therapy Association Vic.

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