

Gardening with Your Preschooler

Gardening with your preschooler can be great fun. You move mulch. You catch toads. You pull a few weeds. You blow the fuzz off dandelions. If your child wants to plant last night's dessert — watermelon seeds, you do that.

Starting a Garden

Find a sunny location for your garden. Plants like a sunny spot that receives at least six hours of sunlight. If your site is too shady, consider gardening in containers that can be moved or placed where there is plenty of sun.

Have your soil tested. Plants need food and a soil test will tell you if your soil has enough food to feed your plants. The soil test report will make recommendations on how much nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P) and potassium (K) you need to add to your soil. Your garden soil may also need lime to neutralize or “sweeten” the soil if it is acid or “sour.” In addition, a soil test can make sure there is no lead (Pb) in your garden soil. Contact your local University Extension Service for more information on how to collect a soil sample and have it tested. A fee is charged for a soil test.

Prepare your soil for planting. Remove all the turf and weeds prior to planting. Dig with a spade and slice through the grass and its roots, removing it in sheets. Depending on the size of a new bed, this may take more than a day to accomplish.

Before planting any seeds or plants, loosen the soil with a spade or tiller. You only need to till the top 6-8 inches of soil. This is a good time to add

amendments to your soil based on your soil test. You may also want to add compost and/or aged manure to your soil to improve your soil's organic matter content.



When planting seeds/plants follow directions on the seed packs or based on recommendations from standard references. Make sure to water seeds/plants thoroughly and keep the garden weeded after planting.

Foster a Love of Gardening

Tips for making gardening fun for your preschooler:

- Give your child his/her own space to garden. A very small area will do—remember everything looks bigger to a child.
- Let kids choose what to plant. Offer guidance and make sure there are some sure-success plants among their picks.
- Relax your standards. Crooked rows or weeds as pests are fine.
- If your child would rather play in the dirt or look at bugs, it's okay. Follow your child's interest.
- Look for the “teachable moment.” If you find a butterfly or praying mantis, explore and learn about the wonders of the moment together.
- Use kid-sized tools for planting and digging. Spoons work well when held in small hands.
- Visit the garden with your preschooler everyday to make sure you don't miss its rewards: opening flowers, the first pumpkin, fresh strawberries, buzz of honeybees, whir of hummingbirds.
- Talk to your preschooler while you work in the garden. Thin a few carrots, explaining that this

gives the other carrots room to grow. As you munch on fresh snap peas, pull a few weeds around them. If the lettuce is dry and it looks like a hot day ahead, set up the watering system, all the while carrying on a conversation with your little one about what you're doing.

- Everyone loves to harvest. Teach your child how to identify ripe vegetables. After picking, show how to take care of the produce.
- Enlist your preschooler to help you weed, allowing for their capabilities and attention span. Then, realize that you'll have to finish the job yourself.
- Leave room for good old-fashioned digging. Holes are a highly popular landscape feature. Look for worms. Add water, and frogs appear.
- Convey the message that some insects are beneficial, and even destructive bugs are highly interesting.
- Do behind-the-scenes maintenance of kids' gardens, keeping them edged and weeded. Don't expect kids to do all the watering and pest control.
- You decide: when it comes to impending doom (no pumpkins appeared on vines; the daisy is uprooted) do you add a pumpkin from the farm stand or replace the daisy? Some parents use loss as a lesson; others smooth things over for success.
- Remember: One of the best things you ever grow may be a gardener.

Children find garden structures irresistible.

- Form bean tepees by placing three to five poles bound at the top and under-planted with pole beans, gourds, cucumbers, miniature pumpkins, or morning glories.
- Create "houses" by planting sunflowers or corn in a square to form a "room."
- Willow or other bendable twigs, can be fashioned into rustic arches. Bury one end of vertical sticks



sufficiently into the ground, and simply weave twigs between them, overlapping as you add new weavers.

- Place a platform on the ground that children can use as a dance floor, stage, or house.
- Position a large boulder for your child to use as a mountain. Add a log and stump to encourage imaginative play.

Safety

A garden is not "childproof," never leave your preschooler unattended. Teach your child what's safe and what's not, and always be watchful.

- Keep chemical fertilizers, weed killers, and insecticides away from children. The best option is to not have any on your property. Use natural methods instead.
- Get kid-sized tools and teach your child how to use them.
- Test the soil for lead.
- Use caution with water. Even a bucket of water can be dangerous for a young child. Always supervise children around water. If you have a pond or stream, test the water for health contaminants, and prohibit children from drinking it.
- Some people have allergies or reactions to certain plants. If your child displays signs of an allergic reaction (stuffy nose, watery eyes, dark circles around the eyes, etc.), see your doctor or an allergist.
- Be aware of poisonous plants. It's almost impossible to totally avoid plants that cause sickness or death. Teach your preschooler which plants are safe to eat and touch.

Sources:

Dorschner, Cheryl. (2003). Parents primer. www.kidsgardening.com retrieved June 13, 2005.
Ellsworth, Denise. (2000). Gardening with youth and children. Ohio State University.

This document can be made available in alternative formats, such as large print, Braille, or audio tape, by contacting your county Extension office. (TTY 1-800-947-3529)

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