

Gardening Projects with Children (courtesy of www.KidsGardening.com)

Gardening has a natural attraction for children of all ages: It takes place outside, it produces almost immediate results, it encourages creativity, and, it involves bugs! And now that most gardens are well under way, there is a great opportunity to bring gardening into your family activities. It's easy to set the children up for success. Be sure they understand that their project is theirs. Give them real tools—even gardening gloves—sized for them.

Be sure to show off their work, the same as you would a school project. It's an easy transition while hosting friends in the yard, or giving 'garden tours'. Send pictures to grandparents. All the effort keeps the children motivated to see the project through.

Several gardening projects can keep a child interested for an hour, an afternoon, or develop an interest for a lifetime.

1. **Adopt a Garden:** Instead of regretting not having planted a separate plot for your child, have them adopt an existing growing plant or wild space. It can be a single pot, or as big as they want. Stake it out, if necessary, for "ownership". Point out regular changes taking place—take photos, draw pictures, collect leaves, flowers or bugs. Keep a scrapbook throughout the season. Next year, your child may have their own ideas for their "space".

Some of the most rewarding plants for children to work with are sunflowers, lettuce, radishes, cherry tomatoes, carrots, pumpkins and zucchini. They grow fast, can be put to basic uses and are easy maintenance.

2. **Start a "Compost Torte":** Explain that making compost is like baking dessert for the garden. The adult should choose the size and site for this project. Then begin with fresh green plant material. Add a layer of old brown leaves or straw. Add daily ingredients with the occasional layer of limestone and some aged manure. Throw some water in the mixture as you turn it over each week (and possibly say some magic words). By Fall the special "dessert" for the garden will be cooked and brown and crumbly—just what your child's garden is looking for.
3. **Send Good Bugs Your Way:** Gather "good" insects to do battle with "bad" insects. Ladybugs (Lady Beetles) and Lacewings are highly effective against aphids, mealybugs, whiteflies, scales, potato beetles and other pests. Use pictures to show your children what you are looking for. Then, gently coax the "good" insects to an infected plant. Beans, cabbage, cucumber, peas, potatoes, squash and tomatoes are susceptible to aphids and other pests. Euonymus and hydrangea, and many trees also can contract a pest problem. Show your child what to look for, aim the beetles in the right direction, and let nature take its course.
4. **Set up a Race Course for Vines:** Vines of all types are growing well now. Attach some twine with cup hooks to a likely wall by the vine. Or create a trellis out of twigs and branches lashed together. Direct a couple of vines to the "race course". Mark the course by inches and feet. Choose 2 of the same vine, or race different cultivars on the course such as scarlet runner beans and pole beans, morning glories and clematis, or

several vining gourds. Water and fertilize regularly and watch the competition! Train the vines on the marked course and keep track of each plant's growth. Your child may well want to have several competitions next season!

5. A scarecrow is always fun! This activity is a creative and whimsical contribution to the gardening effort. Search through the garage, basement and attic for old clothes, costumes or rejects. It also reminds children of the importance of the gardening effort.

Children love to be outdoors, love to dig and love to help the adults. Gardening is a healthy and enjoyable occupation where children can actually see the results of their efforts in a very short time. It could lead to a curiosity that can be fed for a lifetime.

Some great internet sites to continue their interest:

www.KidsGardening.org Projects, suggestions, q & a

USDA for kids: www.agclassroom.org/kids

www.thekidsgarden.co.uk with wonderful ideas that change daily

Google '**Bug of the Week**' for interactive information on lightening bugs, flower bugs and other common insects spotted in the garden.

<http://hgic.umd.edu/> for the Home & Garden Information Center and answers from the University of Maryland and the Maryland Cooperative Extension.

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