

## **Kids in the Garden**

by Cindy VanderTol

Children and gardening are a wonderful combination. What could be better for a youngster than to get messy digging in the dirt, with Mom's approval? Whether it is searching for worms, watching a plant grow from seed, or most importantly, spending quality time with Mom and Dad, childhood is the best time to encourage and cultivate a love of gardening and nature. Gardening provides fresh air and exercise, helps youngsters develop patience and responsibility. It teaches them respect for the environment and the important concept that our food comes first from the earth, then from the supermarket.

### **PLANNING**

Planning their garden bed is a fun activity kids should take part in. Searching through colourful seed catalogues or visiting the local nursery in spring are great beginnings for novice gardeners. Be creative with the shape of your garden. Don't be limited to squares or rectangles. Let your child choose the shape, but remember to keep the size of the bed small enough to be manageable for them. If your children no longer use their sandbox, you can still make use of it for their garden.

Containers are a good idea too as they can be attended to on all sides by small hands. Even a balcony or small patio can be turned into a garden patch with a few small containers. Be inventive with the types of containers used - many different household items can be used for a planter provided you can put drainage holes in the bottom. Dad's old rubber boot, a pretty basket, or an old bucket can all hold soil and a few plants. Planning is also the time to teach that plants need good soil, water and sunshine. Shopping for "kid-sized" tools is a fun activity to share and a good opportunity to talk about garden tasks such as digging, watering, and weeding that must be done throughout the summer.

### **PLANTING**

Choosing what to plant is most important. Try incorporating a theme – perhaps a butterfly garden with nectar producing flowers, or a pizza garden with tomatoes and herbs. To keep enthusiasm high after the initial planting activity, plan for a succession of blooms or veggies throughout the season.

Seeds for the vegetable garden should be those that germinate quickly and can be enjoyed for dinner when mature. Radishes, lettuce, bush beans, and carrots fit this description. Children love cherry tomatoes and can have their own plant to tend in a container. Strawberries are a sweet treat that can be grown in a hanging basket. If space is not an issue, zucchini, cucumbers, and pumpkins grow very quickly.

Flowers for children to grow can be those that grow quickly, such as Nasturtiums, Sunflowers and Zinnias, or those that attract butterflies such as Bee Balm or Purple Coneflower. Try some that appeal to the senses such as the touch of Lamb's ears, the smell of Lavender, or the taste of Chives.

Don't forget to incorporate some art in the garden. Personal art projects such as a lovely painted stone or a handmade birdhouse can be added to the bed to make it even more special for your child.

Children will learn most about the growing process by planting their own seeds. Give them time to do the job as best they can, and make it a playful activity. Be willing to accept a less than perfectly straight row.

Attention spans may be shorter for the young ones, so make maintenance tasks simple and repetitive. Don't forget to provide stepping stones for watering and weeding as plants easily get trampled by enthusiastic little feet. Make it a point to teach them about the benefits and importance of insects in the garden. Bees, earthworms, and ladybugs are welcome friends that have a job to do.

## HARVEST

In the fall, harvesting the fruits of your child's labour is a good time to show off their accomplishments. Encourage them to share the veggies or flowers with friends and neighbours. Grandma and Grandpa would love to receive a beautiful home-grown flower or a vegetable for their salad. Make a scrapbook or photo album of their plantings, or even enter a local horticultural show. Making an exhibit of the summer project to display at school can inspire classmates and teachers to start a garden of their own.

Cleaning up the garden bed introduces composting, and collecting and saving seeds for next year. Late in the season, bulb planting can be a fun family activity for a sunny autumn day.

## SAFETY FIRST!

It is most important to keep your little ones safe in the garden. Be aware of plants that can be toxic, and stay away from the use of chemicals. Children should use sturdy tools designed to fit their hands, and be taught the proper use of each one. Everything should be put away after your time in the garden, and hands should be washed after the work is done. Make sure hats, gloves, and sunscreen are applied before the digging starts, and have a first aid kit available just in case of scrapes and cuts.

Enjoy time with your children while they are working away at their projects, laugh and get messy too. You will find the garden can be a place where lessons are learned and family relationships grow.

## Season long plants for young gardeners

Lettuce – great in containers

Carrots – smaller varieties are fun for kids to eat

Radishes – can be seeded in cool spring weather

Bush Beans – high yield and easy to harvest

Cherry Tomatoes – start from seedlings for quicker harvest

Sunflowers – save seeds for next year's garden

Nasturtiums – seeds germinate quickly and a fast grower

Marigolds – bright flowers all season attract butterflies