

### **Gardening at Any Age**

One of the many magical elements of early childhood is kids' desire to help with whatever it is Mom or Dad is doing, from folding laundry to preparing supper. And yet, so often we find ourselves saying "no" or "not now" to our young children when they ask to become involved in whatever activity we happen to be working on. However, one of the best things about gardening is that when our children ask to get involved, we can happily say "yes!"



There are *plenty* of ways that even young children can play a role in planning and planting a veggie garden.

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### **Pick Your Plants**

While most gardening chores take place in the spring and summer, the task of deciding what plants you will grow in your garden in the year ahead actually starts in February and March. In these late winter and early spring months, it may still be too blustery to get out into the actual garden, but it's the perfect time for sitting down together with your child and planning out which plants you will want to add to your garden when the weather begins to warm.

Consider ordering some of the more interesting and informative garden catalogs to arrive in late winter or early spring, or use your iPad or other tablet to flip through these catalogs online with your child. Bedtime makes for a perfect time to snuggle up and offer a fun botany lesson as you and your child look at the wide variety of seeds and plants that are available.

### **Gift Your Child With a Garden**

As you begin talking about planning your garden, let your child know that one small, well-defined area of the garden in the year ahead will "belong" to him or her, meaning that he or she will be able to select what types of vegetables will grow there. Offer guidance--and the learning opportunity--in helping your child select seeds and plants that are appropriate to grow in your region, but also allow your child the freedom to select seeds and plants that might not be what you yourself would pick.

You will likely find that your child is drawn to colorful veggies, such as purple tomatoes and shiny eggplants, as well as unique textures, including decorative gourds. Encourage your child's creativity in making his or her selections, but be sure to remind him or her that we grow food to eat, so whatever

selections he or she makes for growing in their own garden space will eventually end up on the supper table.

This guidance will help your child remember that while gardening is fun, it's also about raising the food that we eat.

### **Plan Before Planting**

For gardeners, no matter what age, the days on which the delivery person knocks on the door with packages full of seeds and starter plants are exciting ones. With young children, you're likely to find that they're eager to begin planting their own area of the garden right away. This is the time to encourage your child to sit down with paper and crayons and with your guidance, draw out the shape they plan for their own garden area.

Encourage your child to choose a color for each of the plants he or she plans to grow, and to fill in the spaces on their "paper garden" to show where each of the plants will go into his or her actual garden.

### **Time to Plant**

Most gardeners will tell you that the most labor intensive part of their annual gardening chores is preparing the soil each spring to be ready to receive the new seeds and plants for growing. This element of garden prep may involve non-kid-friendly tools such as a rototiller. However once the soil is ready for planting, consider using small stakes and twine to cordon off the area of the garden that you've designated for your child. Work with him or her to use the color-coded plan he or she has drawn to plant the seeds and starter plants he or she has selected in the areas designated on the chart.

By following this plan, your child will be able to keep track of which plants are located in which section of his or her area of the garden.

### **Weed and Water**

Children love watering gardens. They love it so much, in fact, that one thing you will want to keep an eye on is that your child doesn't over-hydrate his or her garden patch as the plants begin to sprout and grow. As the plants begin to pop out of the soil in your child's mini-garden, so will the weeds competing for space and nutrients.

It's very important to teach your child how to identify weeds as opposed to the plants he or she wants to be growing in the garden. Spend some time each week during the growing season working with your child to identify and pull out the "bad" plants while leaving the "good" plants to grow and thrive.

## Harvest Time!

One of the true joys of gardening with children is seeing their excitement as it becomes time to harvest the vegetables they selected, planted and grew themselves. Provide your child with a small basket, and teach him or her how to gently remove the ripe vegetables from each plant, being careful not to damage the plants themselves, which are likely to keep producing more veggies as the season progresses.

## Garden to Table

Now that your child has begun harvesting the vegetables he or she has grown, encourage him or her to think of the ways he or she would like to eat them. You can pull out cookbooks and look together at various dishes that feature the particular veggies that your child has grown in order to decide how to prepare them for a meal or your child may decide to slice and eat his or her fresh food bounty raw, perhaps with a dip of some kind.

The important thing is that your child understands the accomplishment he or she has made in growing real food that will fill his or her tummy and nourish his or her growing body. — [Katie Granju](#)



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*Katie Granju is the married mom of five children, ranging in age from preschooler to college student. She loves vintage bicycles, her backyard chickens and working in her garden.*



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