



# Gardening for Kids

## The Fun of Growing Their Own

by Ronica A. O'Hara

It's May, and the temperature is rising, as is the sap and green shoots. It's the perfect time to involve kids in growing their own garden that will get them outdoors, teach them planning and perseverance, and develop their motor, literacy and scientific skills.

A South Korean study found that gardening provides both high- and moderate-intensity exercise for kids. It builds good eating habits, too: A British study of 46 9- and 10-year-olds found that they ate 26 percent more vegetables and fruit after growing a school garden, and a University of Florida study of 1,351 college students showed them more likely to eat veggies if they had gardened as children.

For the most gratifying results, give kids a sense of ownership. "Let them make the decisions and be in charge of the care of the garden as much as developmentally possible," advises Sarah Pounders, senior education specialist at *KidsGardening.org*, in Burlington, Vermont.

### Getting Started

Order some seed catalogues, look online—or better yet, take a child to the local garden nursery. Let them decide what to grow. Their choices are as diverse as their interests.

Veggies, flowers and plants that draw butterflies each have their own appeal. Some, like sunflowers, radishes and lettuce, are fast-growing, offering quick gratification. Or, they can choose a theme.

"If your child likes Italian food, plant tomatoes and basil. If they enjoy Mexican food, then peppers and cilantro. For flowers—zinnias and cosmos—let them make flower arrangements from early summer into the fall," suggests Susan Brandt, of Bristow, Virginia, co-founder of the gardening site *BloomingSecrets.com*.

Visiting a plant nursery offers the perfect opportunity to put kids on the path to healthy living. Point out and discuss the differences between organic and nonorganic seeds and between chemical fertilizers containing Roundup—labeled "Keep Out

of Reach of Children”—and organic fertilizers containing fish, seaweed and other natural nutrients.

### Choose the Spot

A three-foot-by-three-foot plot is an ideal size for a child's garden, as long as it gets lots of sunshine. If living in an urban area, go with pots of soil in a sunny window.



through a microscope,” says Dixie Sandborn, an extension specialist at Michigan State University. “They can learn about vermiculture by making a worm bin and feeding the worms their table scraps.” With a ruler, they can measure the growth of various plants and create a chart comparing rates. By taking photos or drawing pictures on a daily or weekly basis, they can compile an

album, along with their commentary on weather patterns.

### Get the Right Tools

For young kids with short attention spans, small plastic spades, rakes and hoes might work. But older kids need harder tools. Get them properly fitted garden gloves, plus sunhats and sunscreen.

### Plant the Seeds

Help them read and interpret the seed package directions, if necessary, and use a ruler to measure proper spacing. “I always try to have a mix of plants that start from seed and from transplants, so that kids can have both immediate and delayed gratification,” says Pounders.

### Water, Weed and Mulch

Show them how to use the watering can or hose properly, usually watering only when the soil is dry to a depth of one inch. They can mix their own non-toxic pesticide out of vinegar and salt, and spread such organic mulches as straw, newspaper, grass clippings and leaves to discourage weeds.

### Have Fun

“Let them add personal touches like stepping stones, signs and other decorations that let them express their personality in their garden space,” says Pounders. Help them build a scarecrow, bird feeder, toad house, bird bath, sundial or a tent. Make a teepee or small enclosure and cover it with flowers, vines or climbing beans.

### Harvest the Crop

After picking ripe vegetables, kids can find recipes and prepare snacks or a dish; arrange plucked flowers in vases and take photos; do craft activities with seeds, plants and flowers, like making potpourri or framing dried flowers; or throw a garden-themed party with favors that include herbs or seed packets. “You could have a ‘pa-jam-a’ party. Kids could wear their pajamas, pick berries, and make jam to take home,” suggests Sandborn.

### Get Scientific

“They can look at the soil to see all the living creatures in it, which is especially fun

*Ronica A. O'Hara is a Denver-based freelance health writer. Connect at [OHaraRonica@gmail.com](mailto:OHaraRonica@gmail.com).*

## More to Grow By

**KidsGardening.org:** Designed for schools and families, this site has a wealth of kid-friendly information on everything from seeds to pollinators to creating pirate gardens.

**Build-your-own worm farm:** See how at [Tinyurl.com/KidsWormFarm](http://Tinyurl.com/KidsWormFarm).

**Youth Gardening Clubs:** Many local chapters of garden clubs have these. [Tinyurl.com/YouthGardeningPrograms](http://Tinyurl.com/YouthGardeningPrograms).

**4-H:** Many state 4-H organizations conduct special gardening activities, which can be found by Googling the name of a state along with “4-H gardening”.