Small Hands, Big Garden

Let the kids get their hands dirty.
These garden projects will get young ones excited about plants, exercise and the Earth

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Small Hands, Big Garden

Kids get exercise, learn about nature and enjoy the great outdoors when they work in the garden. These gardening tips and games make it easy to get the whole family involved outside.

Nursery rhymes and children’s books teach kids that gardens can be magical – “with silver bells and cockleshells and pretty maids all in a row” – or filled with forbidden delights, like Mr. McGregor’s beans and radishes.

But in real life, adults tend to drain the appeal out of gardens by insisting on manicured rows and optimal yields. That’s too bad, because kids generally love being outdoors and getting dirty. They make “terrific gardening companions” when adults are willing to surrender some control, says Whitney Cohen, co-author of “The Book of Gardening Projects for Kids” (Timber Press, 2012).

Involving kids in gardening promotes family bonding, physical activity, better nutrition and stewardship of the natural world, Cohen says, who leads garden-based learning workshops for educators through the nonprofit organization Life Lab, based in Santa Cruz, Calif.

Kids are more likely to enjoy gardening if they “can see themselves reflected in the planning and design,” Cohen says, “so involve them every step of the way.”

Planning and Plotting

Start by drawing a basic map of the garden and have kids glue on pictures of plants from garden and seed catalogs. Think of it more as an art project and excitement generator than a specific plan.

“A family garden will look and feel very different from a typical adult garden,” with plants from spilled seeds “sprouting in the middle of pathways,” Cohen says. “These are signs that you are on the right track to making your garden a magical world for your children.”

Still, both adults and children may appreciate having separate spaces. “Giving kids their own small plot or container garden may help adults feel more comfortable allowing them creative freedom,” says outdoor living expert Rebecca P. Cohen, author of “15 Minutes Outside: 365 Ways to Get Out of the House and Connect with Your Kids” (Sourcebooks, 2011).

Kids’ plots should contain low-maintenance, “most likely to succeed” plants like sugar snap peas, lettuce, tomatoes, peppers and carrots, she adds.

Kids also enjoy themed beds, such as a rainbow bed with plantings for every color of the rainbow; a zoo bed where all the plants have animal names and forms (tiger lilies, lamb’s ear, snapdragons, lion’s tail); or a pizza bed in which vegetable pizza toppings are grown.

In shared gardens, if space permits, make walkways wide and beds narrow so kids can reach in to harvest vegetables with minimal disturbance, and so it’s clear where they can tread, suggests Life Lab’s Cohen.

Be sure to make signs for garden beds to instill “an increased sense of ownership over what kids have planted and to help them remember what they have to look forward to through—
Kid-Friendly Veggies
sugar snap peas
lettuce
tomatoes
peppers
carrots

Puttering and Playing
When researching “The Book of Garden Projects for Kids,” Cohen and co-author John Fisher talked with several families about how they managed to keep kids enthusiastic about tending the garden over the course of the season. Most eventually gave up on the idea that kids should always take part in the ongoing maintenance.

“Instead, they made it so kids had a choice of gardening or playing nearby, so they could see adults enjoying the work and gain an appreciation of gardening” by spectating as well as participating, Cohen says.

Keep tasks and chores age-appropriate, and stay close as they take on new skills. “Having high-quality, child-size tools can go a long way to making the work more manageable and provides kids with a sense of ownership and the ability to work right alongside an adult” should they choose to, Fisher says.

Garden activities don’t always need to be task-oriented or productive.

Reaping the Rewards
“Kids who are involved in harvesting

Make mud pies with “baked-in” leaves, twigs and flowers; monitor a rain gauge made out of a wide-mouth jar and a taped-on ruler; or keep a garden sketchbook or journal.

Fun activities for smaller children include garden scavenger hunts, including a “rainbow hunt” – gather a bunch of paint chip samples into a basket and find corresponding colors in the garden and yard.

Repeated rainbow hunts are a good way to illustrate how nature’s palette changes according to season, Fisher says.

Older kids might enjoy researching how residential gardens and yards can qualify for the National Wildlife Foundation’s Certified Wildlife Habitat program.
and preparing healthy foods from the garden are also more likely to eat them,” Fisher says.

Gardening is not about instant gratification, but it helps sustain kids’ interest to include foods they can pick, wash and eat without further preparation, including cherry tomatoes, berries, radishes and sugar snap peas.

Kids also can make homemade herbal tea bags or fill ice trays with mint leaves and edible flower petals (marigold, nasturtium, bachelor button) to spruce up glasses of ice water.

As Cohen and Fisher conclude in their book, “Your children’s love for the outdoors, their sense of connection to plants and animals and their enthusiasm for fresh fruits and vegetables are the real harvest of a family garden.”

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