

Vegetable Gardening with Children

My memories of our family's backyard garden when I was a child center around hard work-gardening was a chore that had to be done to help augment the grocery supply for the family. It wasn't very fun, and it was very time consuming. Maybe that's why having a garden is not as common as it once was. But gardening can be a great activity to do with your children, with many benefits-it provides outdoor physical activity, a chance for family interaction, learning opportunities, and the sense of accomplishment of making something grow. Gardening also helps children to learn about the environment, where food comes from, and the importance of some basic resources,-earth, sun, and water. And, of course it provides an opportunity to encourage healthy eating. I am certainly not a gardening expert, but even with my limited experience and knowledge, my family and I have been able to have some success, and lots of fun! Here are some suggestions and lessons learned from a beginner gardener...

You need not have a huge yard or acreage in order to garden. You can plant in any type of container, create small raised beds with boards or beams, or dig out an area of your lawn. If your children have outgrown their sandbox, you can convert it to a garden. If you would like the challenge of a larger area, or have no place at your home, you might want to try a community garden plot. Most communities have community garden plots where residents can rent a garden space, for a minimal annual fee. In Red Deer, there are community garden plots available at four locations. (Go to www.reddeer.ca and search community garden plots for more information.)

No young child will enjoy weeding or digging in the heat for hours on end, yet large gardens usually require that kind of time commitment. The first time my children began to help with gardening, I made sure to keep their tasks manageable and short in duration. Children usually enjoy watering, but need to be taught how, so they don't drown fragile young plants, or wash seeds away. Overwatering is a risk, as some children will try to nurture their plants too much! They also enjoy digging-provide them with real tools, such as a trowel and small shovel, so that the tools will not break, as many 'toy' gardening tools will. Pulling weeds means you will need to teach your children how to differentiate between new shoots and weeds. Some weeds are more easily recognizable, so you can ask your child to find those. If you have more than one child, it can prevent problems if you provide each them with their very own area of the garden.

What to grow-Certain vegetables are hardier and faster growing than others, so these are ideal for children, who may be watching for results a few hours or even minutes after the seeds have been planted! As well, we live in an area with a short growing season, so be careful to plant crops that are suited to our location-or your children will be disappointed. Seed packages give instructions on how to plant , and how much space is needed. Be sure the seeds you choose are suitable for our climate. You can't assume that because a plant or seed is sold here, that it will do well in our area.

Lettuce-lettuce will be ready to eat about a month after seeding

Radishes-radish sprouts may poke up in 3-10 days

Peas-peas take awhile to mature, but are easy to pick and can be eaten raw. Kids love opening the pods.

Snow peas are popular with children. You will need to stake up the vines, like regular peas.

Beans-try bush beans, which don't need poles or trellises.

Green onions (chives). These come up fast and are easy to grow.

Carrots-carrots are easy to grow, but do take longer to mature. Children will enjoy checking their growth by pulling them at various times of the spring and summer.

Sunflowers-sunflowers take up a lot of room, but quickly grow to amazing heights.

Pumpkins-pumpkins are fun to watch grow, but the vines need a lot of room. Be sure you have enough space for them. (I haven't had much luck in getting a pumpkin to a reasonable size in a city garden in our growing season)

Zucchini-Like pumpkins, the vines need a lot of room to spread, but it is fun to watch the quick growth and huge size of the zucchini.

Tomatoes-buy plants, and transplant them into a suitable sunny location, or into pot placed in a sunny location. Check the length of time to maturity-certain varieties will not mature before fall frosts. Cherry tomatoes are a good choice.

Children may not like the taste of all that they have grown, (like adults). But they will be happy to share with friends and neighbours, and will take pride in having actually grown food!

For information from the experts, there are many books and magazines available. A website I like is www.albertahomegardening.com which has tips, how-tos and lots of Alberta based help.

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