

## Tips for gardening with children

Give them their own garden beds. Whether you use raised beds, containers or ground plots, be sure to give each child his or her own separate plot. Keep it small, very small for young kids. Put their plots right in the middle of the action, with the best soil and light. Set them up for success. Reuse the sandbox. If your children have grown past their sandbox years, consider converting the old sandbox to a garden bed. This gives the child continued 'ownership' of a familiar space and encourages a sense of responsibility to the gardening project. Of course, a productive garden bed needs to be in good sunlight and soil should be free of tree roots. It may be necessary to relocate the sandbox if growing conditions are less than ideal.

Give them serious tools. Cheap plastic child's gardening tools are worse than no tools at all; they break easily and frustrate the user. It can be hard to locate good tools for kids, especially work gloves that fit a small hand. With some garden tools, like a hoe or spade, you can easily saw the handle shorter. Let them use your tools if need be; in this way you're acknowledging the importance of the work they're doing.

Engage them through the entire process, from seed to table. Children learn better when they understand the context of their activity. They will learn that gardening can be fun, but far more than idle play; they are contributing to the family well-being. Besides planting and nurturing their garden beds, be sure they alone do the harvesting and preparation of their crop for the table, no matter how modest the offering. Start from seeds. While it's a convenient shortcut to buy starters, children will learn more by seeing the growing process as it begins, from seed. The care given to sprouting seeds and nurturing the young seedling are a valuable part of the gardening experience. Seeds will need to be started indoors in a warm room and once sprouted they can be transplanted into pots until ready to set out, or they can be placed into a cold frame which is set on top of the garden bed. Cheat a little. Depending on the age of the child, you may need to help out a little 'behind the scene'. Not every garden task is pleasant, and the child may not be ready at all times for all chores. You may need to go out in the evening to pick a few slugs off the lettuce, or be the one to run out and move the sprinkler. They don't have to know about every little help you offer - the child's 'ownership' of the plot is the main thing.

When all else fails, make a scarecrow. The best time to engage children in gardening is when they're in the mood for this activity. If their attention wanes, or the garden tasks become boring, let them build a scarecrow. This activity is still a contribution to the gardening effort and adds another layer of interest to the garden scene. It also reminds the child of the importance of the garden crops.

Show off their work. When giving 'garden tours' to friends, be sure to point out the children's beds. Take a photo of their harvest and send it to the grandparents. The attention given to their work is the best motivator for children to stay involved with a project.

Dear parents - just sharing - Jeremy was always so proud of his "matoes" and "cumbers." He loved to grow plants from seeds. Gardening was definitely a favorite of his!  
Love, Candice

